# DOCUMENT RESUME

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|---|---|
| ED 321 294 | CS 212 455 |
| AUTHOR | Wright, Handel K. |
| TITLE | What Is Shakespeare Doing in My Hut?: A-Level Literature and the Sierra Leonean Student. |
| PUB DATE | Jul 90 |
| NOTE | 134p.; M.Ed. Thesis; Queens University (Ontario, Canada). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Dissertations/Theses - Master Theses (042) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC06 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Background; Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Interrelationships; Drama; Foreign Countries; Literature; *Literature Appreciation; *Schemata (Cognition); Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes |
| IDENTIFIERS | Schema Theory; Shakespeare (William); *Sierra Leone; Soyinka (Wole) |

ABSTRACT

A study brought together literature appreciation, schema theory, and cross-cultural studies to explore the relationship between the backgrounds of students in one sixth-form literature class in Sierra Leone and the contexts of the plays described in the drama section of the "A" level literature syllabus of the West African Examinations Council. The study investigated: (1) what students felt about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular; (2) whether the students possessed the appropriate content and language schemata necessary to understand and critically analyze "A" level drama texts; and (3) whether the differences between the students' backgrounds and the contexts of the drama texts adversely affected students' appreciation of the texts. Three sixth-form literature students were the principal participants in the study. They read two plays, one culturally familiar (Wole Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman") and the other culturally unfamiliar (Shakespeare's "Coriolanus"). Data were collected through three in-depth interviews with each participant. The study found that students preferred culturally familiar texts--they understood and related more strongly to the content and language of the familiar text. However, the amount of material they did not understand in the culturally unfamiliar text was not great enough to seriously hamper their appreciation of the text as a whole. The research also showed that students employed such techniques as attempting to discern meaning from the context, imposing meaning from their own background knowledge, and adopting what they perceived as the author's perspective on issues. (Thirty-nine references are attached, and two appendixes contain a sample A-level examination paper and a sample interview.) (Author/SR)

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ED321294

# WHAT IS SHAKESPEARE DOING IN MY HUT?:
# A-LEVEL LITERATURE AND THE
# SIERRA LEONEAN STUDENT

by

Handel K. Wright

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Education

Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
July, 1990

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# Abstract

This study brings together the three areas of literature appreciation, schema theory, and cross-cultural studies. The study was designed to explore the issue of the relationship between students' backgrounds and the contexts of works of literature. Specifically, it focussed on the relationship between the backgrounds of students in one sixth-form literature class in Sierra Leone and the contexts of the plays described in the drama section of the "A" level literature syllabus of the West African Examinations Council.

The purpose of the study was threefold. First, it attempted to discover what the selected Sierra Leonean students feel about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular; second, whether or not the students possess the appropriate content and language schemata necessary to understand and critically analyze "A" level drama texts, and third, whether the differences between the students' backgrounds and the contexts of the drama texts adversely affect the students' appreciation of the texts.

Three sixth-form literature students were the principal participants for the study. They were asked to read two plays, one culturally familiar (Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*) and the other culturally unfamiliar (Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*). Data were collected through three in-depth interviews with each participant on their reactions to literature in general and "A" level literature in particular and their cognitive and affective responses to the content and language of the two plays.

The study found that students preferred culturally familiar texts. They understood and were better able to appreciate, and related more strongly to the content and language of the culturally familiar text. However, the amount of material they did not understand in the culturally unfamiliar text was not great enough to seriously hamper their appreciation of the text as a whole. The research also showed that, when queried about aspects of the plays they did not understand, the students employed such techniques as attempting to discern meaning from the context, imposing

meaning from their own background knowledge, and adopting what they perceived as the author's perspective on issues.

# Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the following people who provided the expert guidance, support, and encouragement without which this thesis could not have been written:

Dr. Hugh Munby, whose exacting, meticulous, supportive, and infectiously enthusiastic supervision of this thesis served to inspire and at times embarrass me to produce my best work.

Dr. Tom Russell, my second reader and programme supervisor, who has provided help and support with everything from my fear of computers, to finding a place to live, from course selections to acquiring research experience.

Dr. Arlene Stairs, my third reader, whose expertise in the fields of psychology and language studies proved invaluable in the shaping and writing of the thesis.

Dr. Glenn Eastabrook, with whom I had several discussions on the thesis topic, and who helped me focus on the broad issues and the details.

Drs. John Kirby, Don Campbell, Barbara Mansfield, and David Pratt whose diverse courses helped to steep me in the field of education.

My parents, Samuel and Abioseh Wright, and my siblings, Cream, Rowland, and Ebun, who have always been a bedrock of support.

Daphne Johnson who has supported, encouraged, and believed in me.

Jonathan Keister: we lived in Sierra Leone as strangers, travelled thousands of miles from home to Queen's, and became friends.

Thembsie Moche, who proved to be a real friend by helping to type the manuscript when it all got too much to handle.

Finally, Jan Carrick, who typed my proposal in the days when I was computer shy, and helped me take out my frustrations on the squash court.

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## Origins and Focus of Thesis

This thesis is an exploratory, qualitative study in the area of literature appreciation, schema theory, and cross-cultural studies. The study is designed to explore the issue of the relationship between students' backgrounds and the contexts of works of literature. Specifically, it focuses on the relationship between the backgrounds of students in a selected Sierra Leonean sixth form literature class and the contexts of the plays prescribed in the drama section of the "A" level literature syllabus.

Literature appreciation is the understanding and critical analysis of works of literature. The context of a play is the particular time period and geographical and socio-cultural setting that constitute the backdrop against which the events of the play are written. The students' backgrounds refer to their socio-economic status, their social and cultural setting, and the extent of their knowledge about times, places and societies other than their own.

The thesis brings together two issues which are of great concern to this author. The first is the phenomenon of students' poor performance in "A" level literature examinations. The second is the author's interest in the role the interaction between students' background and the contexts of literature texts plays in students' appreciation of texts.

Students' performance in the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) "A" Level literature examination has been less than satisfactory in the past decade. In fact WAEC considered the situation serious enough to attempt to investigate the phenomenon of students' poor performance in "A" level literature and geography (the other problem subject). As a product of the Sierra Leonean educational system who specialized in English language and literature and who went on to teach "A" level literature, this author is aware of a myriad of problems affecting education in general and "A" Level literature in particular in Sierra Leone and perhaps by extension, in West Africa. The dire and worsening economic situation in the country has generated new problems and exacerbated some of the old ones which affect education in Sierra Leone. Many of these factors affect education in a general sense, thus rather than being enlightening, it would be simplistic and imprecise to merely list all of them and declare them collectively responsible for the phenomenon of students' poor performance in "A" level literature. The WAEC report, however, has identified many of the factors that appear to be directly related to the problem of students' poor performance in "A" level literature.

The WAEC study involved questionnaires which were circulated to "A" level teachers (including this author) and examiners. It did not solicit responses from past and present students of "A" level literature, a group which this author regards as being equally qualified to comment on the issue as teachers and examiners. This oversight is one found in many studies that attempt to deal with problems students face by consulting only the "experts" in the field, failing to perceive that students ought to be consulted since they are not only experts in their own right but also the group most directly affected by the problems. This tendency to overlook students as potential experts is a manifestation of Pratt's (1980) assertion that "students are often conditioned not to reason why" (p. 141). The resulting WAEC report contains a concise summary of the problems that constitute the phenomenon and a number of practical and commendable suggestions for improving candidates' performance in "A" level literature. Some of the results of the WAEC report are addressed later in the present study. It is enough for now to note that the research described here takes the position that it is important to document students' views in depth, so giving them a "voice" in such an important matter as their education.

The second issue examined in this thesis is the role played by the relationship between student background and the contexts of texts in students' appreciation of literature texts. Because literature in English is produced all over the world, students of literature are often required to study works set in cultures other than their own. Conceivably, this results in students' encountering problems in appreciating such texts in both a technical and an affective sense. When such a situation arises, the student sometimes tries to make meaning of the text from his limited knowledge of the culture presented. In other cases, however, the student attempts to understand the text by imposing meaning from his or her own background knowledge on the aspects of the text that are unfamiliar. Thus when reading a culturally unfamiliar text, the student's interpretation could be hampered or, alternatively, and sometimes in addition, he/she might impose a different, more culturally familiar interpretation on unfamiliar aspects of the text. As a student and teacher of literature, this author knows that this problem can vary in degree quite radically from student to student and text to text. The issue of the role of the interaction between student background and the contexts of texts has intrigued this author since his days as a secondary school student of literature. Naturally, his concept of the issue was much more rudimentary then. He pondered on such issues as why Shakespeare's characters spoke an English that was so strange and difficult to understand and how cold it would actually be when it was cold enough for Keats' beadsman's breath to "rise like pious incense from a censer old." As he developed personal opinions and perspectives on literature, he learned to modify some of them to meet the perspectives and expectations of teachers (which he knew) and those of examiners (which he surmised), in order to "succeed" as a student of literature. Later, as a teacher of literature, it was intriguing for him to observe indications that his students were going through the same processes.

Obah (1983) asserts that students face both a cultural and a concept gap when reading works from a different culture and concludes that such a situation in fact constitutes an alienating experience for students (p. 130). This is a strong and disturbing but nonetheless valid assertion. Even more disturbing is the fact that the differences between students' backgrounds and the contexts of texts is seldom acknowledged as a problem. When it is, as in Obah's article, or the WAEC report, little seems to be done to address the problem. For example, the WAEC report recommends that steps be taken to familiarize students with unfamiliar contexts of literature texts. However, the WAEC syllabus continues to include so much primary material that teachers are hard pressed to complete the basic syllabus, leaving little time to spend on familiarizing students with the contexts of texts with unfamiliar settings.

In preparing this thesis the author anticipated finding evidence in the data that differences between students' backgrounds and the contexts of texts constituted an impediment to students' appreciation of literature, and some evidence of this is discussed later. While the researcher is interested in underscoring the point through this thesis, he has an even greater interest in exploring a wider issue, namely, the interaction between students' background and the contexts of texts and the role this interaction plays in students' appreciation of texts with familiar as well as those with unfamiliar contexts. Exploring this issue involves addressing several problems. For example, do students necessarily prefer texts with familiar contexts? How familiar are familiar contexts? What strategies do students employ in attempting to appreciate texts with unfamiliar contexts? Do students subscribe to the mainstream views of their society? These questions in themselves are an indication of how complex the issue is. While the thesis does not attempt to provide full and definitive answers to all the questions involved, it does set out to explore them, to come to firm conclusions where it can, and throw light on those questions to which it cannot provide firm answers.

The WAEC report links the two issues treated in this thesis in the sense that it identifies the alien nature of the contexts of most texts as one of the problems that contribute to students' poor performance in "A" Level literature examinations. It should be noted, however, that the issue of students' poor performance in "A" level literature is the secondary focus of this thesis. The principal reason for treating this important issue as secondary is because it has already been investigated. What this thesis contributes to the discussion is a documentation of the views of one set of experts, namely students, who had been overlooked by the investigators. The primary focus is on the exploration of the relationship between students' backgrounds and the contexts of texts and the role this relationship plays in students' appreciation of literature texts.

## Background

This section introduces the reader to Sierra Leone and its educational system, the background of both the participants and the author of the study. The section serves two purposes. By introducing the reader to Sierra Leone and its educational system, it offers the reader a context for understanding the context of the thesis. In addition, it sketches something of the cultural context shared by the students who are participants in this study and whose contexts, therefore, are of significance to the thesis.

Sierra Leone takes its name from the dramatic mountains of the Freetown Peninsula which rise abruptly above the beaches of the coastline to some 3,000 feet. "The 20-mile long (32 km) range was christened Serra Lyoa—'Lion Range'—by early Portuguese traders awed by the roaring and growling of tropical thunder among the steep-sided peaks" (Background to Sierra Leone, 1980, p. 20).

With an area of 28,000 square miles, Sierra Leone is a small country on the coast of tropical West Africa. It lies between latitudes 10 and 13 West and longitudes 7 and 10 North. It is bounded on the North-West and North-East by the Republic of Guinea, on the South-East by Liberia, and on the South-West by the Atlantic Ocean. The country is divided politically into four regions: the Northern Province, the Southern Province, the Eastern Province, and the Western Area (where the capital, Freetown, is situated). In 1980 the population was estimated to be 3,500,000. There are at least 13 ethnic groups. The country was a British colony from the 1800's to 1961 when it gained independence.

Before the introduction of western education, traditional education, which is still practiced to some extent, was provided by parents, members of secret societies, elders, and other members of the community in general. For the most part, boys and girls were educated separately to fulfill mutually exclusive roles. Boys were prepared for their future roles as hunters and trappers or fishermen, warriors, members of the male secret society, leaders of the community, fathers, and heads of households. Girls were prepared to be mothers, gardeners and gatherers, spinners and weavers, members of the female secret society, and homemakers. Some roles were shared by both men and women, however. For example women worked on their husband's farms (in addition to tending their own gardens), fished (using different methods from men), and in some ethnic groups both men and women wielded political power.

Although boys and girls were educated separately, they did learn some things together. For example, the stories and the folklore of the community were handed down to groups of boys and girls around evening fires by the patriarchs and matriarchs of the community. Apart from their entertainment value, these stories educated the children about the culture, values, images and history of their community.

The first formal, western school in Sierra Leone was established in Freetown in 1772. The earliest schools were established by two missionary societies: the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), and the Roman Catholics (R.C.). By 1899 these societies had established 31 schools (for which they were wholly responsible) in the country's hinterland while the colonial government had only established one, the Government Secondary School, Bo. The C.M.S. established Fourah Bay College, the country's first institution of higher learning, in 1829. Between 1928 and 1950, several more primary and secondary schools and teacher training colleges were established by the church societies and the government, which began to take complete control over the entire educational system.

The first decade after independence in 1961 saw a remarkable growth in the educational institutions in the country. Both the number and the enrollment of primary schools more than doubled; enrollment in secondary schools went from 7,097 in 1961 to 33,318 in 1970, and enrollment in teachers' training colleges increased from 608 to 1,075. Njala University College was established in 1964, and the enrollment at Fourah Bay College nearly tripled from 300 in 1964 to 829 in 1974. An Institute of Education was established in 1968 for curriculum development, educational research, and teacher education (Johnson, 1981).

Formal education in Sierra Leone has always been conducted exclusively in English, the country's official language. The Sierra Leonean student's mother tongue, however, could be any of thirteen languages, reflecting the thirteen major ethnic groups. Krio, the mother tongue of the Krios, serves as the country's lingua-franca. While Krio is used extensively for informal purposes, English is reserved for official or formal purposes. Thus, for the Sierra Leonean student, English is either a second language or, in most cases, a third language. For an extremely small minority, most of whom fall in the high socio-economic bracket, English is a dominant language. Sierra Leone's educational system is divided into three basic stages: primary schooling (which lasts seven years), secondary schooling (five or seven years) and higher learning (three or four years). Major external examinations determine, to a large extent, whether or not students move from one stage to another. The strong bias in favour of academia is reflected in the fact that, while the entire educational system was expanding rapidly in the decade after independence, enrollment in the four technical institutions actually dropped from 950 in 1960 to 924 in 1970 (Johnson, 1981).

Entry into secondary school is largely determined by achieving a satisfactory score in the Selective Entrance examination conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). After fifth form, secondary students take what are widely regarded as the most important examinations in the school system, the General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level (G.C.E. "O" Level) Examinations, which are also conducted by WAEC. Success in the "O" Levels qualifies students to enter the work force, sixth form, teachers' training college, or the Preliminary Year of university. Only a very small number opt to do the two years of sixth form at the end of which they take the General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level (G.C.E. "A" Levels). Almost all successful "A" Level candidates enter one of the two university colleges. The others enter the work force or one of the teacher training colleges.

The G.C.E. examinations, especially the "O" Levels, are regarded as being so important in Sierra Leone that they appear to be the sole determinants of how the curricula of most secondary schools are designed. As Porter and Younge (1976) put it:

> The curriculum offerings of the schools are not standardized. Principals have considerable freedom in their planning of courses for Forms 1 to 5 based on the examination syllabuses prepared by W.A.E.C. . . . All but a few of the existing schools adopted the presentation of candidates for those examinations [the G.C.E. "O" and "A" Levels] as their sole endpoint. (p. 13)

While there are concentrations of certain ethnic groups in certain regions, Freetown, the country's capital and the site of the study, is an ethnic melting pot. Thus, while most students in a city like Bo would be Mendes, the student population in Freetown, including "A" level candidates, reflects the country's ethnic diversity. Although most of the more recently established secondary schools in Sierra Leone are coeducational, many of the older schools are either exclusively boys' or girls' schools. Since only a few schools, many of them boys' schools, include sixth form, girls are allowed the option of doing sixth form at girls' or boys' schools. Boys, however, are restricted to boys' schools. Most sixth form classes are therefore coeducational classes in boys' schools. Students usually enter sixth form at age 17 and sit to the "A" level examination at age 18.

Students are required to pass both English language and literature in English at the "O" level before being allowed to offer English literature at the "A" level. However, each school determines the grade students need to obtain in English language and literature in English before being allowed to offer English literature. A pass in oral English (which, unlike English language, is optional at "O" level) is usually regarded as an added advantage but is not a requirement. The English literature syllabus (1983) covers drama, prose, and poetry, and schools are required to select three texts in each genre from a given list of texts which "are considered to be among the best in the different periods and styles" (p. 170). The list is changed every four years. It usually consists of eight plays, seven novels and selections from eight collections of poetry. Examination in the subject consists of three papers, one in each of the three genres. Each paper lasts three hours and candidates are required to answer four questions on each paper. Shakespearean tragedy is a compulsory aspect of the drama section of the curriculum. One Shakespearean tragedy is prescribed for study in detail and candidates are required to answer two questions on the play. A copy of a past "A" level examination paper is provided in Appendix A.

### Purpose

The study has three purposes. First, it attempts to discover what the selected Sierra Leonean sixth form students feel about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular; second, whether or not the students possess the appropriate content and language schemata necessary to understand and critically analyze "A" level drama texts; and third, it attempts to discover whether the differences between the students' backgrounds and the contexts of the drama texts adversely affect the students' appreciation of the texts.

This introductory chapter has identified the approach the study will take, the academic subject and theoretical areas involved, the issues the study will focus on, and the purpose of the study. It has also given a brief introduction to education in Sierra Leone, "A" level literature, and the origins of the thesis. The chapters that follow are chapter 2: Literature Review, chapter 3: Method, chapter 4: Participants' Reactions to School Literature, chapter 5: The Participants and the Two Plays, and Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations. The Literature Review discusses previous studies, articles and books that are relevant to the topic of the thesis. The Method chapter outlines the methods that were used to collect and analyze data for the thesis, information on the subjects, the researcher's experiences in the field and the methods used to analyze the data. Chapters 4 and 5 are the analysis chapters. Chapter 4 treats the participants' reactions to literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. Chapter 5 treats the participants' reactions to several aspects of the two selected plays. Chapter 6, Conclusions and

Recommendations, reviews the findings of the study, considers the implications of these findings for students, and presents the researcher's recommendations.

# CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this literature review is, first, to provide a rationale for undertaking the present study and second, to explore the relationship between students' backgrounds and drama appreciation through a discussion of relevant studies, essays and books. The researcher has drawn on material from such diverse areas as schema theory, cross-cultural studies and literature appreciation since each is a significant aspect of the complex issue of the relationship between student's backgrounds and the contexts of texts and a perspective from which the issue could be analyzed. The review outlines the contribution of material from each field to the understanding of the topic and illustrates how material from such a variety of fields is interrelated in the context of the topic of the thesis. The review concludes by indicating the academic and educational significance of the thesis.

The researcher could find no studies that deal with the relationship between students' background knowledge and literature appreciation. On the one hand, the fact that the subject appears to be so little researched provides justification for the present study. On the other hand, the situation does create a problem of providing and discussing literature that has dealt with the subject. However, there are a considerable number of studies that deal with the relationship between students' content schemata and reading comprehension. Much of the material that is discussed in this literature review, therefore, examines the crucial role content schemata play in students' understanding of reading comprehension passages. Inferences about the role of content schemata in students' understanding of drama texts are drawn from the findings of studies on the relationship between content schemata and reading comprehension. These inferences will be buttressed with materials that examine the relationship between content schemata and literature appreciation, even though they are not reports of studies and do not necessarily mention the concept of content schemata.

Though inferences about the appreciation of drama texts are drawn here from the findings of studies on reading comprehension, it must be stressed that literature appreciation and comprehension are not synonymous except in the sense that they both refer to a striving after meaning. While comprehension is essentially cognitive, involving such factors as prior knowledge and content and language schema, literature appreciation is more comprehensive since it is both cognitive and affective. It embraces not only the cognitive factors already mentioned but also such affective factors as cultural and individual values, beliefs, perspectives, aesthetic and stylistic preferences, and emotional reaction. Thus, literature appreciation could be described as the highest level of text interpretation, and comprehension as a lower level and a necessary step to achieving literature appreciation.

In a chapter on reading comprehension, Mayer (1987) identifies three basic types of knowledge necessary to acquire the meaning of a text or, in other words, to understand what is happening in a text. The three types of knowledge are content knowledge, strategic knowledge and metacognitive knowledge (Mayer, 1987, pp. 283-285). Paris, Ross and Lipson (1984), identify three factors involved in reading and comprehension proficiency. These three factors; schemata, strategies, and metacognition (Paris et al., 1984, p. 1240) are virtually synonymous with Mayer's content knowledge, strategic knowledge and metacognition knowledge. One significant difference, though, is that schemata is probably a broader concept than content knowledge. Although both refer to making use of one's prior knowledge, Paris et al. describe schemata as the organization and activation of knowledge at appropriate times (p. 1240), while Mayer describes content knowledge as information about the subject domain of the passage. In short, schemata refers to one's entire storehouse of previous knowledge while content knowledge refers to that portion of one's previous knowledge that is relevant to a specific topic.

This study is focused on the concept of schemata or, more specifically, content and language schemata. Aron (1986) describes content schemata as "previously established patterns of background knowledge existing in the mind of a reader and used to create meaning from text" (Aron, 1986, p. 136). In fact the concept of content knowledge as Mayer uses it is synonymous with content schemata. Carrell's (1987) assertion that "one type of schema, or background knowledge, a reader brings to a text is content schema, which is knowledge relative to the content domain of the text" (p. 461) clearly illustrates this. Carrell identifies two types of schema, content schema and formal schema:

> one type of schema, or background knowledge, a reader brings to a text is a content schema which is knowledge relative to the content domain of the text. Another type is a formal schema, or knowledge relative to the formal rhetorical organization structures of different types of texts. (p. 461)

Thus Carrell identifies the two basic types of schema, content and formal schema. The latter could and will be considered in this thesis as language schema.

Mayer (1986) asserts that a reader's ability to understand a passage depends to a great extent on that reader's prior knowledge. He also makes the point that problems of comprehension may arise if a reader's perspective is different from the writer's perspective:

> A passage may be difficult to comprehend when the reader lacks an appropriate perspective or when the reader's perspective is different from the writer's perspective. In summary, reading comprehension depends partly on the content knowledge that the reader brings to the task. (p. 290)

Mayer refers to several studies that illustrate the importance of content schemata. In one of them Bartlett (cited in Mayer, 1987) asked British college students to read a folk story from a North American Indian culture. Because his subjects had little prior knowledge of the ideas in the passage, the written accounts they produced after reading the passage were sketchy and distorted with details changed or added to reflect the reader's culture (p. 280).

Other researchers have tackled the issue of the importance of content schemata in comprehension. Adams and Bruce (1980) boldly assert that "without prior knowledge, a complex object, such as a text, is not just difficult to interpret, strictly speaking, it is meaningless" (Adams

& Bruce, 1980, p. 37). The very title of the article by Wilson and Anderson (1986) "What They Don't Know Will Hurt Them: The Role of Prior Knowledge in Comprehension," sounds a blunt warning to educators. The authors point to a number of cross-cultural studies which show that when readers are faced with texts based on a different culture they spend a longer time reading the text, understand less of it, and produce more distortions of events and concepts than when faced with texts based on their own culture (pp. 40-41).

Aron (1986) points out that Steffinsen and Colker (cited in Aron, 1986) have asserted that "through membership in a culture, an individual has privileged information which is represented in a rich system of schemata" (Steffinsen & Collier, 1982, p. 2). Also, Aron reports that Carrell and Eisterhold (cited in Aron, 1986) hold that sometimes "there is a mismatch between the background knowledge, presupposed by the text and the background knowledge possessed by the reader" (p. 130). Aron (1986) asserts that studies on cross-culture comprehension have been based on schema theory and have found that subjects read passages with native themes more rapidly than passages with non-native themes. Also she holds that the studies indicate that "subjects recall a greater amount of information from native reading and listening passages, produce more culturally appropriate elaborations of the native passages and generate more culturally biased distortions of the foreign passages" (p. 136).

Aron designed her own study to investigate whether the potential mismatch in background knowledge between texts and E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) students caused these students to be unfairly placed in remedial reading classes. Also, she attempted to assess whether second language speakers might be receiving low scores on the standardized reading tests (and assignment to a remedial reading class) because they did not possess the background schemata expected of examinees. Aron found that "while native and non-native subjects appear to bring similar knowledge to the passage with a universal theme, they seemed to bring different degrees of pertinent, previously acquired knowledge to the passage with a culture-bound theme" (p. 139). She concluded that English placement and proficiency tests containing passages that require

U.S. culture- bound background knowledge may well discriminate against E.S.L. students, and that the placement of such students may be partially based on how closely their background knowledge matches that presupposed by the test, rather than on an assessment of their second language skills (p. 140).

Aron's findings and conclusions about the importance of cultural differences between reader and text in reading comprehension are supported by several other studies. Lipson (1983) is one such supportive study. Lipson expresses the view of reading which holds that meaning does not reside in the text but in the reader, and that the reader's prior knowledge affects the kind of meaning that is constructed by the reader from the text stimuli (p. 449).

Lipson investigated the impact of culturally specific prior knowledge on the reading comprehension of grade school subjects whose religious affiliation was either strongly Catholic or Jewish. She had her 32 subjects (16 Catholic and 16 Jewish) read 3 passages: one titled "The Ama" was culturally neutral; the second "Bar Mitzvah," Jewish; and the third "First Communion", Catholic. The author found that:

> Each group recalled more text-based propositions and generated more implicit recall for their culturally familiar passage. In addition, they made fewer errors in recall on the passage that contained familiar material, and they took less time to read that passage. Finally, they were significantly more successful at responding to probed recall items. The findings indicate that subjects were much more likely to comprehend texts when they had a culturally appropriate schema into which to incorporate the new information. In addition, the presence of such schemata apparently acted to limit the children's comprehension of unfamiliar text so that accuracy was diminished and distortion increased. (p. 448)

The literature reviewed so far has revealed the crucial role played by the relationship between the contexts of texts and the reader's content schemata in determining not only the reader's ability to understand comprehension texts but also the interpretation of the text at which the reader arrives. Mayer (1987) and Paris et al. (1984) point out the importance of content schemata in general by identifying it as one of the three elements crucial in determining reading comprehension proficiency. Aron (1986) and Carrell (1987) concentrate on the role of content schemata in cross-cultural comprehension.

In his study, however, Lebauer (1985) discusses cultural differences between reader and text as only one of the sources of problems in reading comprehension. One of the others he discusses is lexical difficulties. For example "knowing a word means knowing the many different meanings associated with the word e.g., cleave means both 'to join' and 'to separate'" (p. 139). The other sources of problems he discusses are syntactic difficulties, nonlinguistic difficulties, and rhetorical difficulties.

We could identify these difficulties as some of the finer points of the problem that arises when there is a mismatch in what we could describe as the scope of literacy between the reader and the text. The reference here is not to "scribal literacy," which is the ability to read and write, but to "lay literacy," which is "the set of pervasive competencies and knowledge that is required to participate in a literate society" (Olson, 1987, p. 3). At the basic level, the reader whose literacy does not match that of a text might encounter words that are unfamiliar. For example, an educated Sierra Leonean might be as unfamiliar with the word "baby-boomer" as an educated American might be with the word "poda-poda." Yet "baby-boomer" is widely used in the United States to refer to a person born in the first few years after World War Two and "poda-poda" is widely used as a synonym for "mini-bus" in Sierra Leone.

At a higher level, such a reader might find it difficult, in some instances, to make "literate distinctions, such as those between what is said and what is meant" (Olson, 1987, p. 5). Consider the following hypothetical review of a jazz band's performance which could have been written by a black American: "The whole band was bad, but the piano player was really wicked." On reading this review, the average educated person would be left with the impression that the band's performance was dismal and that, in addition, the piano player had somehow managed to convey the impression that he was an evil person. However, in the black American street sub-culture the word "bad" is often used to mean "very good" and "wicked" is often used as a superlative synonymous with "fantastic" or "excellent." Thus, though the reviewer said the band was bad and the piano player wicked, he actually meant that the band performed very well and that the piano player was particularly outstanding.

Carrell's (1987) idea of formal schema, Lebauer's (1985) list of difficulties, and Olson's (1987) idea of lay literacy collectively illustrate the importance of language schema in comprehension. Though language schema are closely related to and could even be described as an aspect of content schema, they play a significant enough role in comprehension to be identified and examined as a separate factor.

It is not difficult to see how the findings and assertions of the researchers cited above may be valid not only for reading comprehension passages but for appreciating works of literature as well. As far as text context is concerned, all plays are written within a cultural context, just as most comprehension passages are. Readers approach a play as they would a comprehension passage, that is, with a storehouse of prior knowledge which they draw on to form their content schemata to aid them in acquiring the meaning of the text. Also, it is often the case that a reader's cultural background is not the same as the cultural background that forms the context not only of comprehension passages but of plays as well. "Comprehension" and "literature appreciation" are virtually synonymous at one level since both refer to a striving after the meaning of a given text. Finally, although cultural context is a significant aspect of content schemata and is the aspect most of the studies concentrate on, Lebauer's (1985) list of difficulties does indicate that several other aspects of content schemata need to be taken into account. These difficulties could arise not only in reading comprehension but also in literature appreciation.

If the same relationship exists between reader and comprehension text and between reader and play, the following assertions made by the researchers should hold true for both comprehension passages and plays. First, content schemata should prove crucial to understanding a play. Second, a play should be difficult to comprehend when the reader lacks an appropriate perspective or when the reader's perspective is different from the playwright's. Third, when the reader is faced with a play based on a different culture, he or she should spend a longer time reading it, understand less of it, and produce more distortions of events and concepts than when faced with a play based on his or her own culture. Fourth, when the scope of a reader's literacy does not match that of a play, the reader's ability to analyze and understand the play will be restricted.

But are these inferred predictions borne out in practice? This question is one of those addressed in this study. It is crucial to note that at least three prominent literary critics have flirted with the issue of the importance of content schemata in understanding and critically analyzing works of literature. Although Taiwo (1967) does not use the term "content schemata" it is obvious from the following extract that the concept is central to the thrust of his assertion:

> In order to understand modern West African writers fully, it is important to learn about the past to which they make constant reference, to know the political and social organization of traditional African society and how these differ from what happens now. Above all, it is important that readers should appreciate West African religious beliefs and attitudes in order to understand the literature. The understanding of these points is basic to a full appreciation of modern West African work. (p. 26)

Of course, the scope of Taiwo's assertion could be broadened to embrace all literature. In a nutshell, Taiwo's assertion is that it is essential to have the appropriate content schemata in order to fully understand any work of literature.

Without concrete examples to buttress it, however, Taiwo's assertion would remain unsubstantiated. For a concrete example we must turn, interestingly, not to a case of content schemata at work, but to one in which content schemata are not at work. Etienne Galie (1975) documents the case in which a critic, Martin Esslin, attempts to interpret the plays of the Nigerian dramatist and 1986 Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, even though he had very little knowledge of the playwright's social and cultural background. Esslin attempted to interpret the plays "not as African plays but as plays pure and simple" (p. 21). The importance of content schemata is borne out in the fact that, as Galie puts it, "Esslin seems to feel he has been asked to achieve an impossible task and confines himself to brief summaries" (p. 21).

Unlike Taiwo and Galie, Obah (1983) makes use of the type of technical language which suggests that she is addressing the issue not so much from the perspective of a literary critic but, rather, from the perspective of an educationist. She refers to "reading schema theories," "prior knowledge," and even proposes a definition of knowledge (pp. 129-130). The following observations which she makes about education in general in former colonial countries are as valid for the learning of English Literature in Sierra Leone as for the learning of any other subject in any other former colony:

> It is a legacy of colonialism that education in former territories is, to some extent, an alienating experience. The bulk of the material for study refers to things outside the students' environments. Students read at second remove, unable to make such use of the vast experience that they bring to reading. (Obah, 1983, p. 130).

One of the fundamental questions this study addresses is whether or not Sierra Leonean students' appreciation of drama is hampered by the cultural differences that exist between the student's prior knowledge and the contexts of the "A" Level drama texts. In the following extract Obah asserts that what she describes as a concept gap, which is related to a cultural gap, hampers Nigerian students' "as well as many another Third World student's" (p. 130) appreciation of English Literature texts:

> The cultural gap is accompanied by a concept gap. We can illustrate this with an example from imaginative literature in which it is important that reader and writer share a common stock of concepts or images. Nigerian students of English Literature do not always share this common stock and find it hard to visualize what

is alien. No amount of notes can help them appreciate all that they read. They are excluded from total understanding because they stand outside the culture.

> Encountering a poem like John Keats' "Ode to Autumn" which begins "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness . . ." a Nigerian, as well as many another Third World student, devises some way of dealing with it for examination purposes. . . . The fact is that the student comes to respect the poem at second hand; she cannot become directly involved with the poem, loving it for evoking just the right images. She knows about seasons and can learn more about them, but cannot visualize Keats' season when her own environment has but two, one wet and one dry, the latter so ferocious in the very period corresponding to misty, mellow autumn that the earth has scorched under the sun. (pp. 130-131)

Though Obah is both assertive and persuasive, the drawback of her paper is that it is an essay. She has not conducted a study to test her assertions nor does she refer to any studies that have drawn the same conclusions. Though her assertions are probably valid, they appear to be based purely on heuristic knowledge. The present study examines the issue of culture-concept gap empirically in order to draw conclusions based on a firmer foundation.

In a study of how people make cultural works meaningful, Griswold (1987) analyzed the meanings that critics from the West Indies, Britain, and the United States constructed from a single source, the fiction of Barbadian novelist George Lamming. Griswold found that each set of critics interpreted the novels differently. The West Indian reviewers saw Lamming's novels as involving questions of personal and national identity; the British reviewers concentrated on the language of the novels and their literary qualities; and the American reviewers emphasized the issue of race in the novels. Griswold makes the point that each of Lamming's novels exercises a different degree of "cultural power," and considers that "this capacity to engender multiple meanings while retaining coherence shows that cultural meanings emerge from the interaction between cultural works of varying power and human recipients of varying expectations and concerns" (p. 1077).

Two crucial points are implicit in Griswold's findings. First, the meaning of a text is not fixed and it is therefore possible for multiple valid meanings to be generated from the same text. Second, the meaning of a text is generated through an interaction between the content and the context of the text on the one hand, and not only the prior knowledge but also the expectation and concerns of the reader on the other. The meaning each reader generates from the text depends, therefore, on that individual's prior knowledge, concerns and expectations. These inferences, made from Griswold's study, constitute an elaboration on Lipson's assertion that meaning does not reside in the text but in the individual reader.

It must be stressed, however, that meaning at this level is different from the type of meaning that is the focus of this study. The critics Griswold discusses differ on what aspect of the author's works is most important. This is the highest level of meaning, and basically it refers to what the works are about. Although the critics might differ on what issues are most significant, they do not necessarily differ on what is happening within the works. This study is mainly concerned with whether or not the subjects understand what is happening within the texts. Thus it is mainly concerned with meaning in its more fragmented state: the meaning of individual words, scenes, images, etc.. As far as overall meaning is concerned, Griswold is interested in the possibility of multiple valid meanings resulting from the readers' different cultural perspectives. This study is interested in the possibility that no meaning or an invalid meaning could result from a combination of insufficient prior knowledge on the reader's part and cultural differences between text and reader.

Taiwo's (1967) assertions and Galie's (1975) documentation serve to illustrate that there is some precedence for asserting the importance of content schemata in the appreciation of literature. Obah's assertions and Griswold's findings concerning the role of the culture-concept gap and cultural perspective respectively illustrate the significance of affective factors in literature appreciation.

In sum, the literature review indicates that the study delves to some extent into each of the following subjects: schema theory, cross-cultural studies, and literature appreciation. The subjects appear to be interconnected, with cultural differences being the factor that binds them. For example, though Lebauer and Olson treat individual differences in the scope of literacy between text and reader, it is obvious that cultural differences are a primary cause of the differences in the scope of literacy.

Also, though Mayer points to differences in perspective between text and the individual reader, Griswold's study indicates that, while perspectives might differ from individual to individual, there is also a tendency for readers who share a common culture to share the same perspective and for that perspective to be different from that of other readers from a different culture.

Finally, Mayer's and Lipson's examples illustrating that reading comprehension depends to a great extent on the reader's prior knowledge are drawn from cross-cultural studies. Similarly, Taiwo's assertions about the importance of gaining prior knowledge about the cultural context of a work of literature in order to appreciate it illustrate the importance of cultural differences between text and reader.

If researchers in both reading comprehension and literary criticism assert the importance of content schemata, then it is worth investigating, as this study does, whether or not a sample of Sierra Leonean sixth form students possess the necessary content schemata to fully understand and analyze "A" Level drama text. Also, virtually all the "A" Level drama texts are based on a different cultural background from that of Sierra Leonean sixth form students. The 1981-83 "A" Level drama syllabus typifies this situation. Students are expected to study three prescribed texts from a list of eight, including one Shakespearean tragedy which is prescribed as compulsory reading. Only one of the eight plays listed in the syllabus is by a Sierra Leonean author. If studies on reading comprehension indicate that the difference between a reader's cultural background and that of a text results in the list of negative consequences already outlined, then it is worth investigating whether the same is true for the sample of sixth form students and "A" Level drama texts. Finally, if the scope of the reader's literacy proves to be different from that of the text's, it is worth investigating whether the differences seriously hamper the students' ability to understand and critically analyze the text.

As far as academic significance is concerned, the study explores the claim that the conclusions drawn in the area of reading comprehension about content schemata and the contexts of texts are also valid in the area of literary analysis. As far as its educational significance is concerned, the study documents students' views on and feelings about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. This information contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon of students' poor performance in "A" level literature. Also, even though the educational system in Sierra Leone places great emphasis on the G.C.E. examinations, to the point where the schools' curriculums seem geared to ensuring that students pass these examinations, it remains a fact that the "O" Levels are given a much higher profile than the "A" Level examinations. Whatever the reason for this disparity, it is useful to examine a potential problem that could be facing all students of literature by focusing on sixth form students. This study contributes to heightening the profile of the "A" level syllabus and examinations by examining a problem associated with them, and thereby focuses much needed attention on the problems of sixth form students. Finally, it exposes what the researcher considers a significant problem concerning the relationship between the students' background and the contexts of the texts. It reveals that the students are in fact attempting to undertake literary appreciation while being handicapped by a problem that is simply not being addressed.

# CHAPTER 3

## METHOD

This chapter describes, explains and justifies the method of the study and is presented in two parts. The first part describes the plans for data collection and the pilot study (Wright, 1989) that was designed at Queen's University and conducted at Queen's and in London, England. The original data collection plans had to be changed to respond to circumstances that the researcher encountered when he returned home to Sierra Leone to collect data for the study. The second part of the chapter, therefore, describes the researcher's entry into the field, the problems he encountered in collecting the data, the process of selecting the participants, the participants selected, the interview process, and the process and techniques employed in analyzing the data.

### Original Data Collection Plan

The researcher felt that qualitative methods were best suited to bring out students' views on literature and to investigate and analyze the cognitive and affective factors that comprise the students' appreciation of literature. He therefore selected interviews as the primary data collection method. Participants for the study would be six students selected from a sixth form class in a secondary school in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The sample was to be selected to represent a variety of ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. English literature aptitude levels, and degrees of exposure to foreign societies. Initial interviews of all students in the class would be conducted to determine socio-economic status and degree of exposure to foreign societies. Determination of English literature aptitude levels was to be based on the students' "O" level literature in English and English language scores. In-depth interviews would be used to collect data for the study.

The researcher felt that initial interviews had several advantages over other methods such as a questionnaire that could be used to acquire similar information. First, they would act as a "dry run" for the major, in-depth interviews that were to follow and would give the students the opportunity to get used to the idea of being interviewed with a tape-recorder running. Also, they would give the researcher the opportunity to refine his interviewing techniques and to identify the more cooperative potential subjects. Second, they would give the researcher room to tackle the issue of socio-economic status from different angles. This flexibility was considered necessary since it was anticipated that some students would not feel comfortable about giving out such information about their families. The researcher felt that the students would probably feel more comfortable talking about it than writing it down. While there was a risk that some students might be reluctant to talk about their families' socio-economic status, the researcher firmly believed they would be even less inclined to write things down since written information tends to be perceived as a permanent and official record.

A total of three in-depth interviews would be conducted with each participant. Each of the participants would be required to read two plays, namely Wole Soyinka's (1963) *The Lion and the Jewel* and Shakespeare's (1963 edition) *Coriolanus*. The first interview would cover their ideas and feelings about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. The second interview would be on *The Lion and the Jewel* and would be conducted with each student a day after the student finished reading the play. The same procedure would be used for the third interview which would be on *Coriolanus*. In the last two interviews questions would be asked to determine whether the students could understand the imagery, diction, and contexts of the two plays, and how they reacted to certain traditions, characters, incidents, etc., depicted in the plays. A primary purpose of the interviews would be to elicit the students' personal interpretations of the plays. It would be emphasized to them that the researcher was not interested in the "right" answers but rather in their personal reactions.

The plays were chosen because the researcher was confident they had both been used in the past as "A" level drama texts. He had studied one of them, *Coriolanus*, for his "A" levels.

Currently used texts were purposely not chosen. This was to ensure that the students did not give responses that reflected the views of their teachers or those expressed by prominent critics.

The students would be given the option of being interviewed in English or in Krio, the lingua-franca of Sierra Leone. The researcher anticipated that most, if not all the students would prefer to be interviewed in Krio. He rationalized that conducting the interviews in Krio would create an atmosphere of casualness and informality which was essential for eliciting the type of information required from the students. He was also convinced that the students would feel more relaxed and would be more lucid speaking in Krio than they would be if they had to respond in English. However, he realized that conducting the interviews in Krio could constitute a limitation to the study. The researcher would have to translate both his questions and the students' responses into English. Care would have to be taken to ensure that distortion of the students' responses was kept to a minimum. However, the researcher felt that the benefits of conducting the interviews in Krio far outweighed the potential problems.

The researcher felt that in-depth interviews were almost certainly the best method through which the type of information sought could have been elicited. Another method that could have been chosen would have involved having the students write down answers to questions about the plays. However, this method would have created a formal atmosphere and would have suggested to the students that they were taking part in a school test. Consequently, they would tend to respond with what they thought were the "right" answers and would probably not contemplate writing down their personal interpretations.

Perhaps the most significant advantage interviews have over written responses are their flexibility. As McMillan and Schumacher (1984) point out, an interviewer can "follow up leads, probe, and ask for clarification when necessary" (p. 30). The researcher regarded this flexibility as essential in eliciting the type of information that was sought in the study.

In her study of the influence of background knowledge for reading passages by native and non-native readers, Aron (1986) had her subjects read two passages and then give a verbal recall of everything they could remember from the passage. She then used the data to draw conclusions about their reading comprehension. The problem with this method is that although verbal recall is an excellent test of memory, it is a rather limited method of identifying the specific items in a text that affect a student's ability to construct valid meaning. The method selected for this study involved questions designed to test specific indicators of prior knowledge. This is a more thorough and comprehensive basis on which to draw conclusions about the students' content schemata and whether or not the differences between the students' background and the contexts of the plays affect the students' understanding of the plays.

### Pilot Study

After the study had been designed, the researcher decided to conduct a pilot study which would act as preparation for conducting the actual study and a means of discovering the themes and findings that could emerge from the actual study. Originally, the pilot study involved one participant, a female Canadian M.Ed. student at Queen's. She was asked to read Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel.* A taped, in-depth interview was then conducted in which she was asked to react to several aspects of the play including plot, characterization, language, and customs and traditions portrayed in the play. The data collected were then transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

The experience of conducting the original pilot study proved very useful. It provided the researcher with information on the logistics of conducting the in-depth interviews (e.g. it indicated that each of such interviews would be about 45 minutes to one hour long), the type of analysis that would probably prove most useful (i.e. thematic and pattern analysis), the type of questions that should be asked about language (i.e. making a distinction between diction and imagery), and an indication that participants might be quite willing to discuss plot but more reluctant to give personal reactions to alien customs and traditions.

The pilot study was limited, however, to one of the two types of in-depth interviews, that in which the participant is asked to respond to a particular work. It did not cover the other, wherein the participant is asked to give his or her views on literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. The researcher spent several days in London, England on his way to Freetown, Sierra Leone where he was to collect the data for the actual study. While he was in London, he met one of his former "A" level literature students and she agreed to be the participant in the pilot study. She was given the choice of being interviewed in Krio or English and she chose Krio, pointing out that it would be more fun. The interview was specifically about the participant's reaction to literature in general, and "A" level literature in particular. The participant had strong views, both positive and negative, about her experiences as an "A" level literature student and about literature in general.

The researcher made a handwritten transcription of the interview, translating the participant's comments in Krio to English, and made an analysis of the data in point form. This interview was also quite useful. It indicated that it was possible for a participant to discuss the topics in Krio, that translating and transcribing those comments was time-consuming but not as difficult nor as complicated as the researcher had anticipated. It also brought out significant aspects of the issue the researcher had not considered previously, e.g. the relevance of studying literature to one's eventual career.

## Entry Into the Field

The researcher arrived in Freetown a week before the new school year was scheduled to start. He discovered, however, that the reopening of schools had been postponed for two weeks. He used the opportunity to contact and have several meetings with the school's principal and the "A" level literature teacher. He had contacted both of them previously by telephone while still in Canada and they had given their informal consent for the research to be conducted at the school. The researcher used the meetings to provide the teacher and the principal with their respective consent forms, and further information on the proposed study. He also used the opportunity to seek advice, particularly from the teacher, on how to undertake research at the school.

The teacher gave the following excellent pieces of advice. First, he advised that the researcher select his subjects from the upper sixth form only, rather than from both upper and lower sixth forms. He pointed out that the upper sixth form students would start classes as soon as school reopened while the lower sixth form could not even be formed until the "O" level results came out and the school conducted interviews, and selected its students. Since the "O" level results are usually released several weeks after the start of the school year, he felt the researcher would have to wait a dangerously long time to start conducting the research, especially since the researcher's time in Sierra Leone was limited. Second, he advised that the researcher resist the urge to begin conducting the research as soon as school reopened, even though school would be reopening two weeks late. He pointed out that it would be best to wait at least one week in order to give the students time to settle into the routine of school. Third, he offered to discuss the students with the researcher to provide information on their dispositions, work ethic etc., with the understanding that the discussion would not necessarily affect the final selection.

The researcher decided to start the study during the second week of school. The first meeting between the researcher and the class was both interesting and successful. After the teacher introduced him to the class the researcher explained briefly and in very general terms what the research was about and how he proposed to conduct it. He restricted the information he provided on the research topic, explaining only that he was interested in the students' views on and feelings about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. He explained that only six students would be selected as the final subjects, and that the six students selected would be required to read two plays. He emphasized that participation was voluntary and that students needed parental consent to participate. The students were very curious and asked numerous questions. Most of them indicated that they would be interested in participating if they were selected. The researcher concluded by informing the students that he would be coming into the school virtually every day until the data collection was completed and that they should feel free to come into the staff-room to discuss the research, literature, or school in general. The teacher allowed the researcher to observe the scheduled lesson after the discussion.

## Problems Encountered in the Field

There was some uncertainty about when the new school year would start when the researcher arrived in Freetown. In the end it was announced that schools would reopen two weeks late. The general economic situation in the country was such that the morale of both teachers and pupils was rather low. When the researcher was well into the process of data collection teachers in Freetown went on a "go slow" strike: they attended school, kept order in the classrooms, but did not teach. The teachers went on strike because the government had not paid their salaries for three consecutive months. That they had continued teaching and were supportive of the researcher under those circumstances and up to that point was an indication of their commitment to the profession. When the teachers did go on strike, however, neither they nor the students were very enthusiastic about supporting or participating in the research. The students were particularly worried, upset, and uncertain about what to do because the teachers went on strike two weeks before the school examinations were scheduled to start. As a result of the strike the research was suspended for close to three weeks.

The researcher arrived in Sierra Leone when the country was going through an acute petrol shortage. There was often no petrol at the petrol stations and when there was any, motorists waited for hours in formidably long queues to get a ration of a few gallons. Because of the petrol crisis, it was not always possible for the researcher or the students to be at the school for scheduled interviews. Once the researcher waited in a queue from 8:00 a.m. till 12:30 p.m on a day when he was supposed to be conducting an interview from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

In addition to the difficulties of beginning data collection and of maintaining the schedule of interviews, the researcher found out when he got to Sierra Leone that the Soyinkan play he had selected for the study, *The Lion and the Jewel*, had been used as an "O" level drama text rather than as an "A" level text as he had thought. In fact many of the students had studied it for their "O" levels. Since it was essential that the selected texts be of "A" level standard and unfamiliar to the students, he had to change the text. He spent several days re-reading African plays that had actually been used as "A" level texts. In the end he selected another Soyinkan play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. This play proved to be far more appropriate for the study than the first.

After the researcher had selected the six participants, four girls and two boys, one of the girls fell ill and stopped attending school. The day after the researcher replaced her with another girl she turned up at school, eager to resume classes and participate in the study. Since all the participants appeared enthusiastic and had had their parents or guardians sign the consent forms, the researcher was reluctant to drop any of them. He therefore began data collection with seven participants. The teacher had informed the researcher that one of the girls he had selected was constantly in trouble but the researcher had insisted on including her because she had strong views on literature and school in general and was frank and forthcoming with her views. After her first in-depth interview she got into trouble with the school authorities and was suspended for a week. A few days after she returned to school she was suspended for a month, and that ended her participation in the study. One of the boys simply stopped attending school after his first interview. His friends informed the researcher that he had taken a temporary job to pay his fees and intended to come back to school in a month or two. The second boy also stopped attending school during the teachers' strike (after his second interview). His classmates informed the researcher that he was visiting his home village since classes were not being conducted at school. Thus there were six participants originally, then seven for the first interview, five for the second, and four for the third.

## Participants

The researcher allowed the participants to choose their own pseudonyms. The final four participants chose the following names: Muniratu, Surpetta, Yema, and Maureen. Although he had four complete cases, the researcher decided to restrict the study to the first three participants for several reasons. First, the profile of the fourth participant was very similar to that of one of the other participants. Second, the fourth participant was less forthcoming than the other three and was rather tentative about expressing her personal opinions. Third, the researcher felt that there was enough variety in the data from three cases for the purposes of the study. However, the researcher has used his discretion to include information from the fourth case and the other in-depth interviews where he felt it necessary. The following is a description of each of the three major participants.

Muniratu is 18 years old and is of the Temne ethnic group. The researcher had assumed from her real name that she was a Muslim. It turned out, however, that though her family was Muslim she and one of her sisters had converted to Christianity. Muniratu's father works for the National Diamond Mining Company in Tongofield, in the Northern Province. Her mother is a housewife. She lives with her sister who is a teacher so that she can attend school in Freetown. She attended St. Joseph's Secondary School, a highly reputable Catholic school for girls. Except for maths (which is compulsory) and biology (one science subject is compulsory), Muniratu took arts subjects at the "O" level. She obtained fairly good grades in English (English language = 3, and literature in English = 3). She is offering history, English literature, and French at the "A" level. Although she has never travelled out of Sierra Leone, Muniratu has lived in Tongofield, Kono, Kenema, and Bo. She plans to be a bilingual secretary or a translator for an international agency.

Yema is 18 years old, a Mende, and a Christian. She lives with her family in Marjay Town (an upper class neighbourhood just outside Freetown). She gets a regular ride to and from school. Her father is a prominent businessman and her mother is a housewife. Yema attended the prestigious Annie Walsh Memorial School. She offered arts subjects at the "O" level. Her "O" level grades in English (English language = 2, oral English = 1, and literature in English = 2) were the best of all the students in the sixth form class. Her "A" level subjects are English literature, history, and government. Yema was born in Scotland and has lived in Tanzania (1975-1981) and Zambia (1982-1985) but has not travelled much within Sierra Leone. She plans to become a lawyer.

Surpetta is 19 years old, a Krio and a Christian. Her parents are not married but her father does support her. She is her mother's only child and the two of them live in central Freetown. Her father used to work for the government as a curriculum development officer but has now established a curriculum development consultancy. Her mother works as a secretary at the Sierra Leone News Agency. Surpetta attended the Annie Walsh Memorial School. She took mostly commercial subjects at the "O" level. She obtained good grades in English at the "O" level (English language = 2, Oral English = 2, and literature in English = 3). She is a commercial rather than an arts student. Her "A" level subjects are economics, accounting, and English literature. Surpetta has never travelled out of Sierra Leone, and apart from one trip to Port Loko, has never travelled out of Freetown. She intends to become an accountant or a banker.

### Initial Interviews

The researcher tried to cause as little disruption of the regular school process as possible, so he conducted the initial interviews during the periods scheduled for literature. The teacher had the students leave the class one at a time to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the preparation room of the physics laboratory. The principal recommended the use of the room as it was normally out of bounds to students, was not used frequently by members of staff, and was therefore one of the few rooms in the school where it was quiet and where interruptions were unlikely.

The initial interviews revealed that there was a rich assortment of students in the class. The fact that some of the students had offered mostly science subjects at "O" level indicated that those students had originally planned to major in the sciences. Two boys admitted that literature was simply a "fill up" subject for them while other students identified literature as their favourite subject. Most of the students had good "O" level grades in English language and literature in English, some had relatively poor grades, and a few had excellent grades. Each initial interview lasted only about ten minutes yet it took three weeks to interview all the students rather than one week as the researcher had estimated.

On the whole, the researcher felt he was successful in getting the students to relax with and trust him, factors which he felt were crucial to acquiring the appropriate information from the students. The fact that two students admitted to him that they were only studying literature as a fill up subject is an indication of this. A few students did, however, insist on referring to him as "sir" with the connotation of teacher/authority figure that the word carried. He was somewhat surprised, however, at the fact that all the participants chose to be interviewed in English and were actually uncomfortable with the suggestion that they could be interviewed in Krio.

### Selection of Participants

The researcher treated the initial interviews as data for a mini study, the object of which was to select participants for the main study. He wrote field notes on his impressions about each student's suitability immediately after interviewing him or her. After interviewing all the students, he listened to the taped interviews and made more detailed notes on each student's suitability. Next, he excluded the few students who had declared openly that they were not interested in participating in the study as well as those who appeared to be ambivalent about participating. He then tried to select six participants, guided by the characteristics and variety he sought. This process yielded eight potential participants and he conferred with the teacher to select the final six.

## Analysis of In-depth Interviews

The researcher listened to and made notes on each in-depth interview as soon as possible after it was conducted. He used the information from the notes to help him in formulating questions for subsequent interviews. He also started the process of transcribing the data by hand while still in Sierra Leone. When he returned to Canada he continued this process. After transcribing the interviews by hand, he transcribed them onto files on a floppy computer disk since they are easier to manipulate when recorded in that form. He treated the interviews in two ways: first, as individual interviews, and then in threes as individual cases. He treated the transcribed data much as one would treat a text to be analyzed. He read and re-read them, identified themes and patterns, made notes, and highlighted interesting, quotable passages. He then re-read the thesis proposal and made additional notes on the data in relation to the issues, and academic and educational concerns raised in the proposal.

Several discussions were held during which the researcher discussed the on-going process of analyzing the data with two other student researchers who were also involved in analyzing data for their theses, and two university professors who are experienced researchers. These discussions proved to be useful since the researcher and the other student researchers shared information on their chosen analysis methods and received feedback on the appropriateness and effectiveness of those methods.

One of the techniques the researcher employed to make certain aspects of the data more manageable was to represent those aspects of the data or the inferences made from them in the form of charts and diagrams. For example responses to questions on diction in the plays were scattered rather haphazardly throughout several interviews. His comments on and inferences from those responses were scattered through several pages of notes. The researcher put all these pieces of information together on a few charts which showed each word or phrase the participants were asked to explain in one column, the source the word or phrase was taken from in another column, the participants' names in a third column, information on whether or not each understood the meaning of the item in a fourth column, and the researcher's comments in a fifth column. Thus the researcher had all this information on a single page rather than scattered haphazardly in the transcription and the researcher's notes.

After the researcher was satisfied that he had gone through the data enough times, had identified the themes and patterns, and made enough notes on them, he went on to classify his notes and diagrams under appropriate headings. The headings were taken from the various themes that arose from the data analysis. Once this process was completed the researcher was ready to write up the analysis. The presentation of the analysis is made in the next two chapters.

# CHAPTER 4

## PARTICIPANTS' REACTIONS TO SCHOOL LITERATURE

Chapter 4 and 5 are the analysis chapters. Chapter 4 presents the participants' reactions to literature in general, and "A" level literature in particular. Chapter 5 presents the participants' reactions to the two plays. The two chapters examine those reactions in light of the participants' backgrounds and in the light of relevant published research material as well. Each participant's background is considered both unique to that participant and part of the larger Sierra Leonean background. As defined in the introductory chapter, the concept "background" embraces aspects which are unique to individual students such as their socio-economic status and the extent of their knowledge about times, places, and societies other than their own, and others which are shared such as educational background and socio-cultural setting.

It should be pointed out, however, that the concept of a Sierra Leonean background is rather complex, if not elusive, since the country has two major religions, Islam and Christianity, plus a number of animist religions; thirteen ethnic groups, each with a distinct culture, set of values and language; a great disparity between its rural areas, which remain strongholds of tradition, and its urban centres like Freetown where distinct cultures tend to become blended and adulterated with that generic element, modernization. The analysis incorporates both the unique, individual aspect of the participant's backgrounds, as well as the complex national aspect. This chapter concentrates on the participants' reactions to literature in general and "A" level literature in particular.

### Participants' Love for Literature

One of the more striking aspects of the participants' reactions to literature was the unanimity of their liking, even love for the subject. Every one of the seven original participants described literature as his/her favourite subject. In the following illustrative extracts (and all subsequent extracts) the reseacher's speeches are in UPPER CASE while those of the participants are in lower case. Individual participants are further identified by the inclusion of their pseudonyms in UPPER CASE at the beginning of each of their speeches:

> WELL, IF YOU WERE GOING TO TALK ABOUT YOUR SUBJECTS, NOT ONLY THE SUBJECTS YOU ARE DOING NOW, BUT ACADEMICALLY, WHAT SUBJECT WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR FAVOURITE SUBJECT?
>
> MUN: Well, academically, my favourite subject is literature in English.
>
> WHICH WOULD YOU SAY, OF ALL THE SUBJECTS YOU'VE DONE [NOT JUST THE ONES YOU ARE DOING NOW BUT OF ALL THE SUBJECTS YOU HAVE DONE IN SCHOOL] WHICH WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR FAVOURITE SUBJECT?
>
> SUR: I would say it's literature.
>
> BECAUSE I'M ASKING YOU ABOUT LITERATURE?
>
> SUR: No. Because it is.
>
> FIRST OF ALL WHICH SUBJECT WOULD YOU SAY IS YOUR FAVOURITE?
>
> YEMA: Well, I like literature and English. I used to like English best but now it's literature more than anything else.

The participants seem to have decided to study literature primarily because they like the subject. Surpetta's reasons for choosing to study literature at "O" level and for continuing to do it at "A" level are typical:

> WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO DO LITERATURE AT "A" LEVEL?
>
> SUR: I had already done it at "O" level, and I like the subject [inaudible] because I like the subject. I don't think I can use it for my career but I don't want to drop it.
>
> SO WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO DO IT AT "O" LEVEL?
>
> SUR: Because I like it.
>
> SO YOU SAY YOU HAVE STUDIED LITERATURE BECAUSE YOU LIKE IT BUT YOU DON'T THINK IT'S VERY RELEVANT TO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO IN THE

FUTURE. ARE THERE ANY OTHER SUBJECTS THAT YOU ARE DOING THAT YOU FEEL ARE NOT RELEVANT TO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO?

SUR: Not actually, no.

Thus Surpetta is studying literature even though she believes it has virtually no relevance to her chosen career. The other participants did feel that literature had some relevance to their chosen careers. "Modiboh," one of the original seven participants, made the strongest case for the usefulness of studying literature as relevant preparation for his chosen career, journalism:

> MOD: Well, English is the most relevant. You know journalism involves a great knowledge of English. It involves the assessment of particular situations and in doing this you have to express yourself clearly. Your newspaper is going to be widely read so you make sure you put across your message in a way that your audience will get clearly. Doing it will help you learn how to put your arguments so you convince the reader that what you are putting across is pertinent and true. Again, language construction is another one because by doing literature, you get to improve your English, both the written and oral aspects of English.

All the participants have done relatively well in literature in the past. Surpetta, for example declared :

> SUR: I've always received prizes for literature every year since I went to the Annie Walsh.

Such achievements combined with the participants' love for the subject appear to be the primary motivation for continuing to study literature.

Despite this clear interest, the participants were for the most part, rather vague about why they thought literature should be studied. As the following extracts indicate, they tended to discuss English language when asked questions about the usefulness of literature:

> O.K. SO WHY DO YOU THINK SOMEBODY SHOULD STUDY LITERATURE?

MUN: Literature is important. O.K., nowadays it is expected...the second language apart from our local lingua-franca is English. If you want to demonstrate that you are a learned somebody you just have to speak the language. And it just can't be "is" and "was" and "has"—you see you can't be counting vowels. You have to speak good English. Language is very important; you need it as a means of communication with another person, especially out of Africa. For us in the Western Area, in particular [English] language is the fundamental basis of existence. It is not everybody that you meet in the street that can speak your mother tongue, you see. You need English or literature.

YOU HAVE SAID QUITE A BIT ABOUT ENGLISH LANGUAGE. WHAT ABOUT LITERATURE...

MUN: O.K., let me talk about literature. There are various forms of literature. Even with things like novels, magazines and newspapers—if you have not developed that taste for literature, you wouldn't appreciate or be able to really reflect on and analyze what is written easily and understand what is happening in the country. Because it is by reading those, let me say ridiculous literature like cartoons, etc., that help you to develop and be able to analyze any literature. With literature if you are...if you are somebody...what should I say....Anyway, you become eloquent. With English you can become eloquent...

WHAT DO YOU THINK LITERATURE IS GOOD FOR? YOU'VE SAID IT'S NOT DIRECTLY RELATED TO YOUR OWN CAREER, BUT IN GENERAL, WHAT DO YOU THINK SOMEBODY CAN DO WITH A QUALIFICATION IN LITERATURE?

SUR: Well, so many things. You can be easily accepted into English colleges when you have English literature. Say you are not yet at university level you go to England and try to enter university there. If you've got an A or a B in literature, that's great. You are accepted. At first I wanted to become a writer, a librarian, or to do mass

> communication. Those were my ambitions...or law. Literature could be good for all those sorts of things because you learn to speak good English. Anyone who does literature gets to speak the English language very well.

As the extracts indicate, the participants resorted to speaking of the usefulness of English language rather than literature, and though some did mention the fact that literature helped to broaden the mind and to introduce readers to other cultures, they were rather tentative and vague. All of this led the researcher to conclude that literature was a special subject for them, one they studied not because of its practical usefulness but primarily because of their love for it.

This impression was buttressed by the participants' explanations about how they studied literature. One of the original seven participants, "Ramshire", explained that she acted out the different roles in a play, alone in her room. Thus, Ramshire has discovered that, as Bailey (1985) recommends, one of the methods through which a play could be made more enjoyable and accessible is through having students act out the scenes. When asked about poetry she replied:

> RAM: Poetry? I read it aloud to get the sound of it. While reading it, the sound movement can tell you whether it is successful poetry or not.

Muniratu pointed out that she studied literature differently from other subjects:

> MUN: Well, it's funny—I don't study literature—like I would sit at the table and open my history text and read seriously— no! Maybe after school, at my verandah in the evening, I would read the [literature] book casually, just like that. Or maybe when I'm going out—let's say to see the doctor or all the rest of it, I just take one of them and put it in my bag because I wouldn't like to sit there idle. If I'm in the kitchen, while something is cooking, I'll just sit with a literature book— just like that. I don't sit at the table to study literature...seldom. It's when I want to have an overall picture of the text from start to finish—that I sit at a table. But usually I do it at odd times.

These extracts reveal that literature is considered unique by the participants. It is a subject that they study differently from all the others, one that they have more fun with. This is not to suggest that the participants do not take literature seriously. Some of the participants were involved in informal, out of class group discussions with classmates while others chose to study on their own. In the following extract, Muniratu points out not only the fun and casualness, but also the intensity, seriousness and usefulness of such discussions:

> SO WHAT DID YOU SAY ABOUT GROUP DISCUSSION?
>
> MUN: Well, group discussions. They should all have a leader who of course should be the teacher.
>
> WHAT ABOUT OUT OF CLASS...
>
> MUN: Oh, out of class. It depends. It gets to the point where people would argue, people would speak bad English [laugh]. There are others who would confuse [inaudible] and then everybody would laugh. But all the same there are people you don't expect that sometimes come up with possible questions or questions that are very interesting and exhausting. To try to exhaust them, you would have covered the whole play or the whole book. But all the same again it's done in a chaotic form—sort of like a chorus—everyone trying to speak at the same time.
>
> BUT DO YOU FIND SUCH DISCUSSIONS USEFUL?
>
> MUN: Yes! Very, very useful. Because if I want to throw out a question I would tell everybody to please keep quiet and try to answer this question and it's a possible question that's going to "fall" for June. And then everyone would pick up their pens with shouts of "ah, wait oh, wait oh, we nor ready yait", then "shoot", then off we go. They will laugh but it's all useful.

In fact the participants seem to consider themselves an elite group who have the necessary preparation, resilience, and flair for literature to tackle the subject at "A" level. This attitude is apparent in their virtually contemptuous comments about students who drop literature after the first year of sixth form:

MUN: And then they have problems because they haven't formed the right base in order that they could cultivate it at form 6. At form 5 maybe they hadn't gone as deeply into the texts, it's just that they prepared some questions that luckily came in the exams and then they got a good grade. So with that they were encouraged to come to Form 6. And most of them, especially among the boys, they have not cultivated that attitude towards reading. Some of them read novels as if it was a prescribed text (laugh).

MOD: That is laziness [laugh]. Once you've decided to do something, I don't think it's wise to drop it. You must be strong and not drop things half way through.

YEM: I'm not going to name names but there are some. I mean when we came in lower sixth, those guys were doing literature dropped out. If you notice there are far more girls than boys now doing literature. You know what the boys used to tell us? "Ah, bo, we are surprised at you. Literature is very difficult. Why are you doing it?" and all that. Some of them feel that when we get to the exam hall, some of us will faint when they bring the question papers. But I don't believe that. I believe once...as long as you are determined to do it, you can go ahead and do it.

## Literature and the sexes

It is interesting that, though the participants are contemptuous of all students who drop literature, they identify boys as being particularly susceptible. The researcher had noticed that there were fifteen girls and nine boys in the literature class. This was striking not only because this was a boys' school but also because there were more boys than girls in the sixth form as a whole. While some of the participants felt the reason was simply because the boys were not up to "A" level literature, others like Surpetta felt there was nothing significant in the ratio of boys to girls in the literature class:

> I'VE NOTICED THAT THERE ARE MORE GIRLS THAN BOYS IN THE CLASS. WHY DO YOU THINK THERE ARE MORE GIRLS IN THE CLASS?
>
> SUR: Well, so many people dislike literature. Maybe they get biased towards girls when it came to St. Edward's literature class. Maybe it just happened that most of those who like it are girls.

This ratio of boys to girls had interesting consequences in the classroom. Bousted (1989) has observed that:

> In recent years there has been increasing evidence that girls in mixed sex classrooms talk less often, and for shorter periods of time than boys. Girls are more likely to answer "closed" questions—where a short affirmation of the teacher's intended meaning will suffice; to compete less actively and keenly for the teacher's attention, and to find it more difficult to expose themselves and their ideas in the classroom by talking at any length. (p. 41)

During the one lesson the researcher observed, however, the girls dominated the discussion, speaking more often and longer than the boys and dominating the teacher's attention. In fact, at one point during the lesson, the teacher commented that as usual it was the girls who were doing most of the talking, apparently in an attempt to urge the boys to participate. The teacher's comment and the female students' domination of the discussion indicated that the class was a marked exception to the trend observed by Bousted and other researchers.

Perhaps the explanation of this phenomenon lies in the students' school background. The girls are from exclusively girls' schools and are used to being assertive in class. This theory, however, does not explain the fact that the majority of students who have dropped literature are boys nor does it explain why the boys, with a few exceptions, were far less forthcoming than the girls in the class.

Another interesting observation the researcher made was that far more girls were interested in participating in the study than boys. He inferred from this and all the other evidence that the girls were more interested in the subject or at least more interested in doing anything involving literature outside the classroom. While this study did not set out to investigate the issue of sex differences in literature classrooms, the researcher is of the opinion the situation he observed in the class and comments that were made were intriguing and deserved to be mentioned and commented upon. He believes that the issue could and should be studied more thoroughly and more vigorously. Suggestions about the aspects that could be investigated are identified in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

## The Gap Between O and A Level Literature

Though the participants are contemptuous of students who drop literature, they readily acknowledge that there is quite a gap between "O" level and "A" level literature:

> YEM: Well the only thing I can say is that "A" level literature is very, very, difficult. "O" level literature...I really didn't have any problems with "O" level literature. We didn't do as many books as we are doing now and they were easy for me.

It appears that there are several reasons why the participants find "A" level literature so much more difficult. The increased number of texts mentioned by Yema is just one example. The following extract brings out some of the ways in which another participant, Surpetta, felt "A" level literature was more complex and difficult than "O" level literature and some of the reasons why this presented a problem for students. One of the problems she mentions is the expectation "A" level teachers have that students are conversant with certain technical terms, concepts and skills and can comfortably incorporate these aspects in their analysis of texts when, in fact, some students only have a vague knowledge of what the terms mean, and how they operate:

> SUR: Well [inaudible] I think the teaching is sort of rushed up. There's no time for you to spend too long learning something. It seems like we are being taught literature in form 6 as if you should have known, you already should have known these things.

WHAT THINGS SHOULD YOU HAVE KNOWN?

SUR: I don't know how to express it exactly. We are being taught...[pause]...

IMAGERY AND ALL THAT SORT OF THING?

SUR: Yes! You should have known all these things and they should have become a part of you—but it's not so. When I was in form five all these things...Well, yes, they gave us words and phrases to find out the meaning but we weren't doing things in depth. Like unseen poems, we weren't taught to appreciate poems, all those sorts of things. We weren't. We were asked to give the rhyming scheme of the poem but we weren't asked diction. Although, yes, when we came here we were given those words to find out their meaning but really, I find it somehow difficult, especially with unseen poems.

There appears to be a discrepancy between the "A" level teachers' expectations of what the students already know about the techniques of literacy analysis (in effect their prior knowledge in the field) and what the students actually know.

The problem seems to be that students like Surpetta feel "O" level literature has simply not prepared them adequately with the necessary background knowledge and skills to undertake "A" level literature. In addition, the students find the leap between the type of questions and the depth and maturity of analysis demanded in response to those questions at "A" level to be considerably advanced compared to the demands of "O" level questions.

SO YOU THINK "A" LEVEL LITERATURE IS MORE DIFFICULT?

SUR: Yes! It's very, very difficult. The questions being asked are so vague. You know sometimes they ask you a question, it's just as if you can answer even without reading the book. You have to be really intellectually fit to answer some questions. Some people have read the book, they understand it but they wont be able to answer some particular questions.

SO ANOTHER PROBLEM, THEN, IS THE WAY QUESTIONS...

SUR: The way they ask the questions. It seems, you know, those overall questions, it doesn't matter if you've spent so many nights reading the book over and over again. You have to start finding the answer somewhere else. I don't know how to express myself.

SO IT'S NOT JUST A MATTER OF KNOWING THE TEXT?

SUR: Yes, it's not just that. You have to have a certain style, a way of answering them. Sometimes you see some of the questions, you've read the book but you don't even know how to start to answer them.

While questions in the "O" level literature basically require students to regurgitate content, it is obvious from the sample "A" level literature paper provided in Appendix A that at the "A" level the questions are comprehensive and demand what the WAEC report (1985) describes as "intelligent reaction from the general to the specific via a critical as well as an intellectually sound perspective" (p. 4).

Surpetta's comments about the inadequate preparation for "A" level literature she obtained through studying "O" level literature is apparently a widespread problem. In a review of *Students of English*, a study of Australian "O" and "A" level and first year undergraduate literature students, King (1989) asserts that one of the most significant findings of the study was that "students felt that the work they were asked to do at each stage of their education did not prepare them for the work of the subsequent stage" (p. 59).

Surpetta's assertion that "O" level literature did not prepare her for "A" level literature and her perception that at "A" level the teaching is "rushed up" may be consequences of a perennial and apparently universal problem that has been examined by researchers like Russell (1988) namely, the pressure on teachers to cover the syllabus. Russell pinpoints the dilemma that "Wendy", the subject of his study faces: "The dilemma that Wendy now faces concerns the question of what she should be teaching. Should she emphasize content because the content will be on the exam, or should she teach the concepts underlying the content?" (p. 5). The

"O" level literature teachers are faced with a similar problem and it is hardly surprising, since they are acutely aware of the significance the Sierra Leonean society puts on students' performance in the "O" level exams, that teachers opt to cover content at the expense of teaching concepts and skills that are essential elements of advanced level literature analysis.

Faced with equal if not greater pressure to complete their syllabus, "A" level literature teachers can hardly afford to devote any time to remediation. All they can afford to do, as Surpetta points out, is to give the students a list of technical terms, and point out aspects of imagery in the hope that students will not only find out the meaning of these terms but also incorporate them in their analyses of texts.

It is obvious from Surpetta's comments that the pressure to cover the syllabus has grave consequences for "A" level literature students. The problem, as has been illustrated, begins at the "O" level stage and is further exacerbated at the "A" level stage. The pressure teachers feel to cover the syllabus and the serious consequences this has for students' learning is a significant problem that was not brought out in the WAEC report.

"A" level literature usually involves a transition from school type teaching style to university lecture type teaching. The object of this transition is to prepare students for university. Students like Surpetta obviously find the transition abrupt and confusing rather than gradual and helpful. The effect of this transition in teaching style on students' learning is another problem the WAEC report did not bring out.

Faced with new teaching methods, questions that are more complex and more intellectually demanding, a greater amount of material, demands for more advanced analyses, and expectations about their background knowledge they cannot meet, both the students' performance and their confidence in their aptitude for literature has dropped since starting the "A" level programme. The following extracts indicate that the participants face the prospect of the "A" level examinations, not with self assuredness but rather with uncertainity and grim determination:

MOD: That is laziness [laugh]. Once you've decided to do something I don't think it's wise to drop it. You must be strong and not drop things half way through.

ON PAGE 11,...[at this point in the interview Surpetta asks the researcher in a whisper what diction is] YOU HAVE NEVER HEARD OF THE TERM "DICTION"?

SUR: I know it but I don't understand it. I told you I was stupid at literature.

YOU MOST DEFINITELY ARE NOT. NOT FULLY UNDERSTANDING A WORD DOES NOT MAKE YOU STUPID.

SUR: It's very different. The student is introduced to so many strange things. I don't know if it's the way we are being taught or if it's the fault of the teacher or something but I can't...some things were really revolutionary about literature when I came to form 6.

YEM: Well, the only thing I can say is that "A" level literature is very, very difficult. "O" level literature...I really didn't have any problems with "O" level literature. Some of them feel that when we get to the exam hall, some of us will faint when they bring the question papers. But I don't believe that. I believe once...as long as you are determined to do it, you can go ahead and do it.

The data contain several suggestions for improving the teaching of "A" level literature. The participants advocated several simple but practical, significant and potentially valuable additions and changes that could be made to classroom activity:

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE WAY LITERATURE IS BEING TAUGHT PRESENTLY. WHAT CHANGES WOULD YOU MAKE IF YOU WERE TEACHING YOUR CLASS LITERATURE?

MUN: Well, I don't think I would teach them differently from Mr. D. The only thing is I would break the class up into groups, into tutorials, in order that the weak ones will have time to catch up with those that have found a footing on that particular book.

SAY YOU WERE GIVEN THE CLASS TO TEACH. SAY YOU NOW HAVE AN HONOURS DEGREE IN ENGLISH AND YOU ARE GIVEN FORM SIX LITERATURE TO TEACH. WHAT SORT OF CHANGES WOULD YOU MAKE?

SUR: For example, I wouldn't read the text alone. By doing that I would be discouraging the students from ever reading the text. So that's number one. [Inaudible] he only reads the text. He reads the parts of all the characters. When you allot the parts you get people interested, whether they like it or not. When they read, I would stop and explain. Yes, he does that but when he is the only one reading there comes a time when I'm listening but I'm not hearing. People get sleepy, people get bored when they hear the same voice over and over again. I would change that.

WHAT OTHER CHANGES WOULD YOU MAKE?

SUR: Well, I'll try to talk to them, to encourage them more, ask them their problems individually, try to find out what particular [inaudible], whether they are having problems with unseen how they are finishing the poems, instead of just trying to teach them. You know what I mean. When you call somebody and say "What's your problem?" [inaudible] they don't know what is diction, what is...whatever. I would give them lots of examples, try to [inaudible] that person instead of just "O.K., diction is so and so. I've taught you what is diction," then bring some poems to class and say this is diction. Some people, they don't look at it at that moment, so when exams come they have problems and you can't...well I would discuss their problems with them and try to help them.

ANYTHING ELSE?

SUR: I would have literature classes in the morning instead of the afternoon.

WHY WOULD YOU MAKE THAT CHANGE?

SUR: Because in the afternoon, after all the lunch, people are well fed, they get sleepy, the place is hot. Literature is just like maths—when you get it in the afternoon you will never get to like it, especially if it's literature or maths.

## Summary

This examination of the participants' reactions to literature makes several strong statements about students' feelings about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. The participants' love for the subject is striking. They love reading, love studying literature and all of them, without exception, declare that literature is their favourite subject. Their positive experiences and successful performance in the subject in the past have strengthened that love and encouraged them to continue to opt to study literature.

It is an unfortunate fact, therefore, that their love and enthusiasm for literature is being tested through their experiences with "A" level literature. Those experiences have shaken their confidence in their aptitude for the subject. The principal culprit appears to be the "gap" between "O" and "A" level literature. They identify some of the aspects of this gap as being the amount of material to be covered, the complexity of the examination question, and the depth of analysis expected of them. While "A" levels are subsequent stage to "O" levels and are therefore more demanding, the participants point to the failure of "O" level literature to prepare them adequately for "A" level literature, the change in teaching style, the fact that they do not receive enough individual attention, and the fast pace at which the syllabus is being covered as factors that exacerbate what could have been manageable problems with the "O" level—"A" level gap. When invited to do so, the participants put forward several simple, practical and valuable additions and changes that could be made to classroom activity.

Even though the participants were asked only a few questions about "A" level literature, they pointed to several of the same problems outlined by the WAEC report. For example their assertions that there is an inordinately large gap between "A" and "O" level literature, that "A" level literature is radically different from "O" level literature and that the latter does not prepare students for "A" level literature is endorsed by the WAEC report:

> The "O" level literature is nothing like the "A" level literature. Knowledge of "O" level literature in English (apart from stimulating reading habit in the students generally) hardly prepares a student adequately enough for courses in "A" level English literature. The gap between "O" level and "A" level literature is rather too wide. "O" level literature syllabus deals principally with mere regurgitation of scenes, episodes and identification of character, etc. whereas, in "A" level literature syllabus the approach which includes the internalization process (i.e. awakening of students' literacy sensibilities, artistic consciousness and the critical essence) is much more complex. "A" level literature syllabus has nothing to do with direct regurgitation but its demands include intelligent reaction from the general to the specific via a critical as well as an intellectually sound perspective (p. 4).

However, the participants also brought up points which the WAEC report does not. For example the WAEC report mentions the lack of qualified "A" level literature teachers in some schools. The participants however, were more concerned with the apparently confusing transition from school to lecture format introduced at "A" level. This aspect of teaching has significant negative consequences for some of the participants. The WAEC report's failure to include these significant problems reinforces the importance of seeking students' views.

This chapter concentrated on the participants' feelings about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. The next chapter concentrates on their appreciation of literature in a more specific sense since it examines their reactions to, and analysis of, two specific plays.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE TWO PLAYS

This chapter explores the relationship between the participants' backgrounds and the contexts of the selected drama texts and the role this relationship plays in the participants' appreciation of the texts. Treatment of this issue involves an examination of both cognitive factors such as prior knowledge and content and language schema and affective factors such as cultural and individual values, beliefs, perspectives, and emotional reaction. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the participants' prior knowledge of literature texts and their affective reaction to the works they had studied prior to "A" level. The second section deals with the participants' understanding of and affective responses to selected aspects of content schema pertaining to the two plays. The third section treats the participants' understanding of and affective responses to selected aspects of language schema pertaining to the two plays.

### Prior Knowledge

This researcher believes that prior knowledge (which for the purposes of this study refers to students' background knowledge of literature prior to "A" level) is an important factor responsible for the participants' current performance in literature. It is useful, therefore, to know the works they had studied and to consider the significance of those selections for their current literary appreciation.

All the participants had studied literature from a wide variety of time periods and cultures. The list Yema gives of some of the texts she had studied previously is illustrative:

> CAN YOU TELL ME SOME OF THE NON-AFRICAN LITERATURE THAT YOU HAVE STUDIED? YOU'VE MENTIONED SHAKESPEARE AND WORDSWORTH. CAN YOU NAME OTHER WRITERS OR TEXTS YOU HAVE READ?

YEM: Well, I've read poems from *One Thousand Beautiful Things*, which includes poems from many different countries, I've read Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," *The Old Man and the Sea, King Henry 1V, Madame Bovary*...well there must be others.

AND WHAT ABOUT AFRICAN TEXTS?

YEM: African texts? *Tell Freedom, Things Fall Apart, The Lion and the Jewel* I read [inaudible] but I didn't study it in school. I've read *Weep Not Child* and others.

Yema gave the two lists spontaneously and it is clear that the lists are comprehensive but not exhaustive. Even so, the researcher noted that only one of the texts in the lists, *Tell Freedom*, was a Sierra Leonean work. Yema's situation was not unique as the following extract reveals:

HAVE YOU READ WORKS ABOUT SIERRA LEONE?

SUR: Well, they are not available. The other day as I was passing by New Horizon [bookstore]. I saw a book that was written about Sierra Leone but Sierra Leonean books are not easy to get to read. They are usually expensive and there are very few copies.

BUT HAVE YOU READ ANY? HAVE YOU READ *KOSSOH TOWN BOY* FOR EXAMPLE?

SUR: No. I've read *Road to Freedom.* That's the only Sierra Leonean novel that I've read. And my history books [laugh].

The first participant, Muniratu, had not studied any Sierra Leonean texts at all. Thus, even though the participants had been exposed to works of literature from a wide variety of cultures, they had little experience with literature from their own culture.

That the students have been exposed to literature from so many cultures and periods is beneficial in several ways. For example, it means they have learned about other cultures and times through those works. As Knights (1989) succinctly points out "richness of cultural diversity is one of the rewards of the study of literature" (p. 52). Also, it provides them with a sound basis on which to build their appreciation for literature in general and does not restrict them to being able to appreciate literature from their culture and time period only.

However, their lack of experience reading and studying Sierra Leonean works of literature is rather disturbing. There is a sizable amount of Sierra Leonean literature that schools could prescribe as texts for secondary school students.

It is surprising and disappointing that a system of selection of school texts which afforded the researcher the opportunity to study only one Sierra Leonean work as a literature text until he got to university is being perpetuated a decade later. The exclusion of Sierra Leonean works from secondary school booklists sends the silent but strong message to students that works of literature written by Sierra Leoneans and about Sierra Leone are not deserving of their attention as students of literature. So the students are being denied the opportunity to see and explore their culture through the eyes of other Sierra Leoneans. If, as Boomer (cited in Gambell, 1986) declared to the International Federation for Teachers, "the goal of literature is the enfranchisement and empowerment of children as learners and actors in the making of culture" (p. 3) then one wonders what sort of culture or whose culture Sierra Leonean students are being empowered to learn about and create if they are denied access to literature about their own culture.

The researcher was interested in how the participants reacted to the less culturally familiar European and American works they had read and the more culturally familiar African works. All the participants expressed a preference for African works:

> O.K. SO YOU MUST HAVE DONE ENGLISH PLAYS AND YOU MUST HAVE STUDIED SOME AFRICAN PLAYS. HOW DO YOU REACT TO THE TWO TYPES OF PLAYS?
>
> MUN: Well for English plays, they are a bit alienated—you know what I mean. This is Africa—they will refer to things like snow and all the rest of it that we have never

seen. But like Wole Soyinka—he brings you to the spot, sort of transports you because everything he refers to is something I have either come across or heard of.

SO THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT ARE MENTIONED IN SOME ENGLISH PLAYS THAT YOU HAVE NEVER HEARD OF...

MUN: Yes! Never heard of. And that can create problems concerning the understanding of that particular play. That by the way is one problem that we are facing with Milton's "Paradise Lost." It seems as if his digressions they are so out of place for Africans. Maybe Europeans would adapt a bit because maybe these biblical places and other places he talks about in Europe and Asia etcetera, might be familiar to them, and his dramatic allusions and all the rest of it. But considering Africa, it sort of alienates us completely.

I SEE WHAT YOU MEAN. SO WHICH, COMING BACK TO AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN PLAYS, WHICH DO YOU PREFER?

MUN: African! I relate to African plays better because they are in my own local setting. And the language is something I have come across or that I use.

Muniratu makes several important points in the extract. Her preference for African texts is based on their being set in culturally familiar contexts, her "own local setting." She points out that English plays, on the other hand, make references to places she is unfamiliar with (culturally unfamiliar contexts) and make references to things like snow which she has never seen and to which she cannot relate. These last two points constitute a forceful endorsement of Obah's (1983) assertion that in attempting to appreciate texts with unfamiliar contexts, readers are faced with both a cultural and a concept gap. It is interesting that, like Obah, Muniratu concludes that this constitutes an alienating experience for the reader. Obah (1983) also makes the point that, with an unfamiliar text, the student cannot become directly involved in the work and Surpetta underscores this point by saying that she can get deeply involved in an African text:

SO YOU THINK AFRICAN WORKS HAVE MORE RELEVANCE FOR YOU?

SUR: Yes, and value. I enjoy English novels, though, very much because they are very interesting but African novels...yes, they too could be interesting but when you are reading them you forget about the novel being interesting. You...how should I say it...you feel for the people in the book the person is writing. You are drawn into the story of whatever they are writing about because you are an African and you know, you hear about things happening around you and then you read it in a book. So you know that the things written there are related to present day society.

Thus for Surpetta, association with the settings, characters and situations depicted in culturally familiar texts can be so strong that the lines between fact and fiction actually become blurred. This assertion is a persuasive argument for using culturally familiar works to attract and retain literature students' interest in the subject.

Yema's responses to questions about African and European literature were also revealing:

YEM: Well, I'm not biased but I prefer African plays. Some plays...let's take *The Lion and the Jewel* for example, some African plays centre their main theme on African life, village life in Africa and sometimes they use the idea of the Europeans coming in with their ideas, trying to wipe out the people's customs and traditions and all that. I think it's really exciting. I'd rather read about Africa than about anywhere else.

WHY IS THAT?

YEM: I find it interesting. I think African life and culture is very interesting.

WHAT ABOUT EUROPEAN CULTURE AND LIFE...

YEM: I don't know much about that but what I know is not as interesting as what is African because in Africa we have certain myths, beliefs and ways of using language. I mean you can take a single proverb and make a whole story out of it. It's exciting, there's a lot to it.

Yema admits that part of the reason why she does not appreciate European literature as much as African literature is because she does not know as much about European culture and life. The implication is that she therefore cannot relate to those texts as closely as she can relate to more familiar, African texts. Secondly, she endorses Muniratu's point that the language of African texts are somehow more vibrant, more interesting to her.

All the participants, therefore, indicated a distinct preference for works of literature set in the more familiar, African contexts. They understood and were more interested in the issues raised in African works. Also they empathized more with characters in African texts than those in texts with less familiar contexts. Finally, they understand and relate better to the language and imagery of African works better than to the language of works with less familiar contexts.

It must be pointed out, however, that because the African literature texts they had read were not set in Sierra Leone, the cultures portrayed in them were similar but not identical to the participants'. Surpetta makes this point in the following extract in which she discusses her favourite text, *So Long a Letter*, a novel by a Senegalese author:

> AND WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ISSUES THAT ARE BROUGHT UP IN...
>
> SUR: The treatment one would expect from a man in the latter years. It also tells you about the society, their own society, their customs, their way of behaving, their culture.
>
> IS IT DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN CULTURE?
>
> SUR: Yes, it's different. The author tells us how most of their ceremonies are conducted, their rites, the behaviour of the people and also the main incident of the novel...
>
> SO YOU SAY THE CULTURE PORTRAYED IN THIS NOVEL IS DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN CULTURE? BUT IT'S ALL IN WEST AFRICA ISN'T IT? [PAUSE] I MEAN IT'S SET IN WEST AFRICA, SENEGAL IS IN WEST AFRICA.
>
> SUR: Yes, it's all West Africa but there's a difference between, I should say Sierra Leone and...well the way people behave in Sierra Leone and the way they behave in Senegal.

Even though Senegalese culture is similar to Sierra Leonean culture, Surpetta, who is a middle class, urban Christian, considers the poor, rural, Muslim culture portrayed in the play very different from hers. This illustrates that there are degrees of cultural familiarity and it would therefore be erroneous to assume that Sierra Leonean students would necessarily understand and identify with the culture portrayed in a text simply because that text is African.

As the researcher had anticipated, all of the participants had studied Shakespeare before getting into the "A" level programme. The following extract is illustrative:

WHICH SHAKESPEAREAN TEXTS HAVE YOU STUDIED BEFORE AND AT WHAT LEVEL?

SUR: I studied [inaudible], *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, etc.

ETCETERA! THESE WERE ABRIDGED VERSIONS?

SUR: Yes. At form 2. And then I did *Merchant of Venice* in form 3, the full version. I had *King Henry IV* at form 4. I also read *Romeo and Juliet*.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY YOU ALSO READ *ROMEO AND JULIET*? YOU MEAN FOR YOUR OWN PLEASURE?

SUR: Yes.

HAVE YOU READ ANY OTHER SHAKESPEAREAN PLAY FOR YOUR OWN PLEASURE?

SUR: [pause] No.

O.K., YOU'RE DOING *HAMLET* IN FORM 6. SO YOU'RE QUITE FAMILIAR WITH SHAKESPEARE'S WORK.

SUR: Yes.

The three final participants had also studied Soyinka before. This latter fact is something of a coincidence, however, and does not reflect the experiences of the rest of the class. For example, of the original seven participants, only the final three had studied Soyinka before sixth form.

Though the participants had not read the two plays before, the fact that they had read other plays by the playwrights helped them to formulate a context within which to consider the issues raised in the plays:

> WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE WAY THAT SHAKESPEARE PORTRAYED WOMEN IN THE PLAY?
>
> MUN: Well I would say that this is one of the plays in which Shakespeare has elevated women to a certain stage. Usually his women are associated with love scenes and all the rest of it. They don't take active part especially in political affairs in his works. But this particular one he elevated them to a station of adviser to the hero. They were the only people that the hero would look up to.

If Muniratu had not read other Shakespearean plays she would have been in a position to state only that the women played an important role in *Coriolanus*. However, because she has read other Shakespearean plays she was able to consider the playwright's portrayal of women in *Coriolanus* within the context of his portrayal of women in his other plays. The result is that she was able to make a more interesting, knowledgeable, analysis which involves pointing out the roles women play in *Coriolanus* and contrasting those with the roles they usually have in Shakespeare's plays.

When Surpetta was asked about the language of *Coriolanus*, she also incorporated her knowledge of other Shakespearean plays in her answer:

> WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY?
>
> SUR: Well it's the easiest to read, the language, of all the Shakespearean plays I've read. There are no really long speeches, no very complicated lines. In fact I read the book without looking at the footnotes. I could understand all of it.
>
> DO YOU THINK IF YOU HADN'T READ OTHER SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS IT WOULD BE AS EASY FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND?

> SUR: Maybe it was because I had already read other ones that I found it easy to read but I think it was easy anyhow. The language was simple—for Shakespeare.

Because she has read other Shakespearean plays, Surpetta was able to say that she usually found Shakespeare's language difficult, even to the point where she usually had to refer to footnotes to understand his language, but that the language of *Coriolanus* was comparatively easy to understand. This is a much fuller, more informed reply than she could have given if she had not read other Shakespearean plays. Furthermore, although she did not embrace the idea wholeheartedly, she does not discount the possibility that her experience of reading other Shakespearean plays made understanding the language of this play easier.

It would appear, therefore, that studying the works of an author helps students to develop an invaluable storehouse of knowledge about that author and his work which they can draw on to derive meaning from and to analyze a subsequent work by the same author. In their article on the significance of prior knowledge on children's recall of familiar and unfamiliar text, Marr and Gormley (1982) conclude by pointing out the significance of prior knowledge on students' ability to reason from text:

> What we have here are three somewhat distinct prior knowledge influences that appear to be almost layered. At the top layer, we can say that knowing more about one's world (general scriptal knowledge) has an effect on comprehension of various topics and subtopics. At a second layer, we can suggest that knowing something about things that are like the subtopic in question influences comprehension. Finally, knowing about that particular topic influences comprehension of a text on that topic. (p. 102)

Marr and Gormley's conclusions are restricted to the significance of prior knowledge in students' understanding of comprehension passages. This researcher believes that for literature at least, one more layer could be added to the three layers of prior knowledge influences mentioned by Marr and Gormley. As the responses of the participants for the present study reveal, a reader's prior knowledge about an author's characterization, language, etc., acquired through reading the author's works has an effect on that reader's ability to comprehend and appreciate subsequent works by the same author. Therefore, for literature, prior knowledge of the author and his works constitutes a fourth layer of prior knowledge influence on readers' understanding and appreciation. It has been illustrated that one of the advantages of having this type of prior knowledge is the production of fuller, more informed, critical analyses of texts.

Each of the participants had studied several Shakespearean plays. However with exception of Muniratu, who had read five Soyinkan plays previously (several for her own pleasure), the participants had read only two Soyinkan plays before reading *Death and the King's Horseman*. They therefore could be expected to have greater prior knowledge about Shakespeare and his works than about Soyinka and his works.

This point is reflected in the fact that all the participants made comparisons between *Coriolanus* and other Shakespearean plays in their analysis of that play, yet none of them volunteered any comparisons between *Death and the King's Horseman* and any other Soyinkan play. As far as acquaintance with the author and his work are concerned, the participants were in a better position to appreciate the Shakespearean text.

## Content Knowledge

For his exploration of the participants' content knowledge of the plays, the researcher examined several cultural aspects which were important to the understanding of each play and attempted to discover through the interviews whether and to what extent the participants understood them and whether or not the aspects were part of their background knowledge before they read the plays. Also, he examined the participants' affective responses to each aspect of content knowledge. He has decided to present and examine the participants' responses to two aspects from each play in this analysis. From *Death and the King's Horseman* he has selected the "death of deaths" tradition and the Egungun society and from *Coriolanus* he has selected class conflict between the patricians and the Roman election procedure for the consulship.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka portrays the contrasting attitudes of the Yoruba people and the British colonial administrator to the "death of death tradition". The Yoruba believe that when the king dies he should be accompanied to the afterworld by his horseman, who is also an important chief. They believe this ensures not only the safe arrival of the king in the afterworld but also the smooth continuation of life on earth. A break in this tradition would leave the king's spirit roaming the abyss between the two worlds and this would break the link between the world of the living and the afterworld with disastrous consequences for the living. When the king dies his horseman is supposed to will himself into a trance while doing the stately dance of death, so making the transition from the world of the living to the afterworld. This mysterious process is known as the death of deaths. When the horseman, who is also the protagonist, attempts to undertake this role in the play, the colonial administrator (Pilkings) interrupts the dance of death, breaking the horseman's trance, and arrests him in the belief that he is preventing a needless suicide.

Understanding the death of deaths concept is essential in appreciating the play. Two of the participants, Muniratu and Surpetta were vaguely aware that Europeans had a version of a horseman while Yema had never heard of the concept. Part of the explanation for the vagueness of their concept of a horseman might lie in the fact that, as Muniratu pointed out, horses are rare in tropical Africa and there are none at all in Sierra Leone.

None of the participants had heard of the Yoruba version of a horseman before reading the play. However, they were able to understand not only the concept of the Yoruba horseman but also the "death of deaths" concept to some extent from the context of the play:

AND WHAT ABOUT THIS IDEA OF "DEATH OF DEATHS," WHAT IS IT?

MUN: Death of deaths?

THE WAY ELESIN WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE. HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE THE DEATH OF DEATHS.

MUN: Well yes. He wasn't the only one who died because there was the horse and the dog. He was supposed to die in a way...his own death was to be the supreme death among all of them...

BUT HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO DIE?

MUN: Well to kill himself.

HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO KILL HIMSELF?

MUN: By committing suicide [laugh].

HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO COMMIT SUICIDE? BY DRINKING POISON, BY STABBING HIMSELF?

MUN: Drinking poison, stabbing himself?

I'M ASKING YOU.

MUN: I'm not sure. There's no indication of him stabbing himself. I'm sure he should have been hypnotized...

WHO SHOULD HAVE HYPNOTIZED HIM?

MUN: Himself. Because at the latter part of the book, while going through the forest with the praise singer, it seems as if the praise singer had certain words that brought the man beyond his own being. Made him to have thoughts...sort of cajoling the man to put himself in a certain situation in which he wouldn't think of the world. He would think of saving everybody. He would think of seeing things that are not seen, think of having things that don't happen here—having conversation with the gods and as such crossing the river of life.

SO THAT'S THE WAY HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE?

MUN: Well, I'm sure something should have been done at the final stage. But it was not done.

Of the three participants, Muniratu understood the "death of deaths" concept best. In the extract she gives a detailed and accurate explanation of the way the horseman was supposed to die and about what his death was supposed to accomplish. Her response is an illustration that it is sometimes possible for a reader to acquire meaning of the unfamiliar solely from the context of a text. However, her response to the final question revealed that she found it difficult to fully accept that it was possible for the horseman to simply will himself to death.

This inability to understand or accept that the horseman was supposed to will himself to death is reflected in the other participants' responses. Surpetta, for example, has far less to say about what the "death of deaths" is:

> SUR: Well the death of deaths is the way Elesin has to die for the king.
>
> AND HOW SHOULD HE DIE?
>
> SUR: He should take his own life, commit suicide.
>
> HOW SHOULD HE COMMIT SUICIDE?
>
> SUR: [pause] Well, I don't remember.

Surpetta, therefore, seems to have acquired far less of the meaning of the unfamiliar concept of death of deaths from the context of the text. Although this is true for Yema also, it is interesting that the two of them have much stronger views on the concept than Muniratu. Part of the reason for this may be the fact that, as the last quote from Muniratu illustrated, she tried to see the concept from the perspective of the Yoruba community. Yema on the other hand looked on the concept from a combination of a personal, outsider's perspective and from the horseman's individual perspective:

> YEM: Well, the king's horseman is someone who leads the king's horse or something of the sort. He does everything with the king because he also gives an account of how he got the best of everything just like the king. He is considered as a sort of father figure himself but again he has a big role to play because when the king dies, he steps [inaudible] the king has to be buried but the horseman has to be

buried with the king. That's the major role that the horseman has to play. But I think it's barbaric.

YOU THINK IT'S BARBARIC?

YEM: Yes. Maybe he wasn't ready to die. I don't know, it seems as if he was ready to go along with the custom but if he had tried hard enough, he could have met his death before Pilkings came and got in his way. Maybe he wasn't prepared to die because he still had his eyes wide open, he was still a man of the world.

As far as emotional reaction is concerned, therefore, Muniratu refrains from passing judgement on this custom while Yema declares it barbaric.

To illustrate the colonial administrator's irreverence for or lack of understanding of Yoruba culture, Soyinka includes a scene in which the administrator and his wife dress up for a fancy dress ball in Egungun vestments they had seized from members of the cult. While the administrator and his wife were concerned only with creating a stir at the ball, the Yorubas regarded their action as desecration of the vestments of a sacred cult. In order to understand the Yoruba's point of view, it is necessary to understand the nature and function of the Egungun cult.

As this researcher has pointed out (Wright, 1987), Egungun is an exclusive male cult whose members deal primarily with matters pertaining to the worship and appeasement of the dead. According to de Graft (1976), the Egungun masked figure is believed to be the embodiment of, or at least representative of a particular dead individual. Each Egungun is covered from head to foot in cloths which are as similar as possible to those in which the deceased was buried. The Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson (1921), points out that it is considered a crime to touch an Egungun in public and disrespectful to pass it with one's head uncovered.

Although the Egungun cult originated in Nigeria, it exists in Sierra Leone. There is a marked difference between the reactions of Muniratu and Surpetta who have background knowledge about the Egungun cult, and Yema who does not, to the idea of the colonialists using the Egungun costumes as fancy dress:

> MUN: Well actually, for now, this modern day, it wouldn't be bad because people put all sorts of things on. You would only ridicule yourself, expose yourself to ridicule. But then, it was held as sacred, it was held in high esteem. People never imitated the Egungun. I'm sure Pilkings knew that because he had stayed so long in that region. And for his wife to have known the natives to such an extent would mean that their customs were as known to him as the back of his palm. He knew he wanted to go and impress the whites, and for them it was impressive, but for the Africans it was desecration of their sacred rules and regulations.

Although she feels that the power and influence of the Egungun cult has become eroded in modern times, Muniratu understands fully what the Egungun mask and vestments represent to the Yoruba and therefore understands their perspective on the incident and even shares it to some extent. Yema's reaction is quite different:

> DO YOU KNOW WHAT EGUNGUN IS?
>
> YEM: No.
>
> YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF THE WORD EGUNGUN?!
>
> YEM: Not till I read this book.
>
> YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE EGUNGUN SOCIETIES IN SIERRA LEONE?
>
> YEM: No.
>
> SO YOU WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT PILKINGS AND HIS WIFE WERE WEARING? YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN AN EGUNGUN?
>
> YEM: Never! I don't know, maybe they are wearing masks or something because if you read the book that's the general idea you get.
>
> SO HOW DO YOU REACT...IF YOU WERE WATCHING THE PLAY AND YOU SAW PILKINGS AND HIS WIFE IN THIS EGUNGUN COSTUME, WOULD YOU REACT?
>
> YEM: I wouldn't know how to react because I don't know what the costume looks like. If it's funny, I would laugh [laugh].

Because Yema has no background knowledge of the Egungun cult she is unable to perceive the radically different perspectives of the administrator and his wife on the one hand and the Yoruba on the other. She therefore is not in a position to develop an informed perspective of her own on the incident. The contrast between Muniratu's informed, emotional and multi-layered response and Yema's superficial, unemotional, and uninformed response is a striking illustration of the importance of background knowledge in literature appreciation.

The analysis of content knowledge and its significance to comprehension now turns to the Shakespearean play read by the participants. One of the important issues around which the plot of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* revolves is the relationship between the Roman nobility—the patricians, and the commoners—the plebians. The play opens with the plebians armed and out in the streets in rebellious anger. They had a list of grievances against the patricians who they felt lived off the fat of the land and were unconcerned about the welfare of the common people. The patricians decide to accommodate the plebians by appointing three tribunes to settle their disputes and to represent their interest in government.

Some of the patricians, notably Coriolanus, hold the plebians in contempt. The plebians' ficklemindedness, their gullibility and their anger at and distrust of the patricians made them pliable pawns in the hands of their tribunes who hated and sought to destroy Coriolanus. His excessive pride, rash frankness and undisguised contempt for the plebians made Coriolanus an easy target for the cunning tribunes. The volatile combination of Coriolanus' fiery temper and contempt for the plebians, on the one hand, and the tribunes' manipulation of the angry and fickle plebians, on the other, led in the end to Coriolanus' banishment from Rome. To fully understand the play, the reader has to understand the characteristics of the two groups, their attitude towards each other and their changing positions as the plot unfolds.

The terms "patrician" and "plebian" have survived and are part of contemporary English vocabulary. The researcher was therefore interested in discovering whether the participants were acquainted with the contemporary meanings or the more specific original meanings of the two terms. It was difficult to determine how well Muniratu understood the two concepts:

O.K. IF WE TURN TO THE DICTION OF THE PLAY FOR A WHILE, HAD YOU HEARD OF THE TWO WORDS "PATRICIAN" AND "PLEBIAN" BEFORE READING THE PLAY?

MUN: Yes, a patrician is a patriarch, a sort of father figure—that's the idea I gather from the word. Anyway, it's a sort of father figure that has been elevated to a certain position. Plebians were the commoners, the common people.

MUN: Well the plebians were the ordinary people of the country whereas the patricians were the nobles that had been elevated and were in control of power.

Muniratu's first speech illustrated that she had a clear understanding of the term "plebian", but that she was uncertain about the term "patrician". What she could discern from the word was that patricians were patriarchs of sorts. Her use of the word "nobles" in her second speech suggests that she understood that the patricians were actually the ruling class, but her statement that they "had been elevated" suggests that she felt that the word referred not to the nobility in general but to certain members of the nobility who were actually part of the government.

This ambivalent understanding or possible misunderstanding of the concept could mean that Muniratu misinterpreted the class conflict between the plebians and the patricians to be a rebellion of the plebians against the few nobles who form the government. While the researcher was unable to determine if this was the case, he feels it is necessary to point out that if Muniratu failed to recognize the class conflict in the play for what it was, her appreciation of the issues in the play was seriously hampered.

Yema indicated that she had never come across the two terms before:

BEFORE READING THIS PLAY, HAD YOU COME ACROSS THE WORDS PATRICIAN AND PLEBIAN?

YEM: Not at all.

> SO YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEY MEANT? YOU HAD NEVER HEARD OF ANYONE BEING DESCRIBED AS A PATRICIAN OR A PLEBIAN?
>
> YEM: Never, never.
>
> FROM READING THE PLAY, WHAT DO YOU THINK A PATRICIAN IS?
>
> YEM: Well, I think it has to do with government officials or something of the sort.
>
> AND PLEBIAN?
>
> YEM: It's the same thing. The only difference is that they are divided into different parts.

Yema was apparently unable to understand the concepts from the context of the play. However, this initial conclusion was premature. As the following extract indicates, she did come to some understanding of the terms:

> FROM READING THE PLAY, HOW DO YOU FEEL TOWARDS THE TWO SIDES? WHO DO YOU SUPPORT?
>
> YEM: Well, I support the masses because, if it's true that there was famine and all that and they were hungry and not getting enough food, I think the government should give them food. But again the people in the government have a point because as Coriolanus said, if they take the food and give them for free....When they made their first demands the government gave them corn, free corn. They took it to mean that the government was afraid of them. So they kept going to the government over and over.

While she was unable to grasp the Roman concepts of patrician and plebian, Yema, who described herself as a socialist, was able to interpret the relationship between the two groups in terms of contemporary class struggle. Thus she imposes her background knowledge of contemporary socialist perspective of social structure on the Roman society presented in the play in order to make sense of it. Thus another means through which the participant could make meaning from an unfamiliar aspect of a text is to interpret that aspect in terms of a similar aspect which was a part of her background knowledge.

The following extract reveals that Yema's affective reaction to the two groups was not based on Shakespeare's characterization nor on the plot of the play. Rather she imposed her socialist perspective on the issue and so she sides with the plebians, or "the masses" as she prefers to refer to them.

> SO WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?
>
> YEM: The masses of course! Always!
>
> OH, YOU ARE ALWAYS ON THE SIDE OF THE MASSES?
>
> YEM: Yes.
>
> DO YOU THINK THAT SHAKESPEARE MANAGES TO CONVINCE YOU THAT THE PLEBIANS HAVE A BETTER CASE OR DO YOU THINK IT'S BECAUSE YOU ARE ALREADY A SOCIALIST THAT WHEN YOU READ THE PLAY YOU SUPPORT THE PLEBIANS?
>
> YEM: Well, he concentrated more on the politicians, the patricians. So, I don't know whether he was on their side or what, but I was on the side of the masses.
>
> SO YOU ARE ON THEIR SIDE DESPITE THE FACT THAT SHAKESPEARE DOESN'T SAY MUCH ABOUT THEM?
>
> YEM: Yes.

Thus Yema recognizes but resists the author's probable perspective and brings her own values to bear in formulating a perspective and an affective response to the issue. This is an example of a situation in which the reader does not share the author's perspective. Surpetta felt she had come across the terms patrician and plebian before but could not remember what they meant. However, she did formulate a strong opinion about the plebians, based partly on the author's characterization of them and partly on her previously expressed disapproval of uneducated people:

SUR:...it's not wise to listen to people, especially people like these. I don't think some of them are literate.

YOU DON'T SEEM TO LIKE THE PLEBIANS VERY MUCH.

SUR: No I don't. They are too much like driven cattle.

These contrasting responses illustrate the validity of the assertion made in the literature review of this study that the meaning each reader generates from a text depends on that individual's content knowledge, values, perspective and concerns.

The second aspect of content knowledge examined was the procedure for electing consuls. Muniratu knew of the origins of the tradition of asking for the people's voices in Greece from reading government (politics) texts. Thus the tradition was part of her background knowledge before she read the play. Although she approved of the tradition in general, she disapproves strongly of the "showing of wounds" aspect:

O.K., WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE TRADITION OF SHOWING OF WOUNDS?

MUN: It's archaic. They really wanted to have alibis before they would believe, especially anything to do with obtaining honour. But it was immoral.

IT WAS IMMORAL?

MUN: It was immoral. Showing of wounds—suppose that wound had become swollen up or nasty. You have to expose your body to the crowd just because you want to receive an honour.

SO YOU DON'T LIKE IT?

MUN: I don't like it, of course!

Surpetta, who appears to share Coriolanus' contempt for the plebians, does not believe he should have to seek the people's voices at all:

SUR: I think he should have been able to do whatever he wanted without asking their opinion.

IF YOU WERE IN HIS PLACE WOULD YOU GO OUT AND SEEK THE PEOPLE'S VOICES?

SUR: No I wouldn't.

WHY NOT?

SUR: Because at times it's not wise to listen to people, especially people like these. I don't think some of them are literate.

Surprisingly, however, she approves of the showing of wounds aspect of the tradition:

SUR: It's necessary. I think that part is necessary. Since they wouldn't believe anything, he should show them so they see for themselves what he went through for their sakes.

Thus Muniratu and Surpetta hold exactly opposite positions on the tradition of asking for the people's voices in general and the showing of wounds aspect specifically.

The analysis of the participants' content knowledge reveals that it was easier for them to understand aspects which were already part of their background knowledge before reading the play. It also reveals that, when faced with aspects that were unfamiliar, they tried to interpret those aspects in terms of similar aspects from their background knowledge. Sometimes they were unable to form perspectives and opinions on certain unfamiliar aspects. For the most part, however, they formed quite strong opinions and perspectives irrespective of whether the aspect under consideration was familiar or not. It was clear, however, that when the aspect under consideration was part of the participants' background knowledge they formulated more informed opinions, with greater substance to buttress those opinions than when the aspect was not part of their background knowledge. On the whole, it could be said that the participants did possess the appropriate content knowledge to appreciate both plays. However, they had more content knowledge about Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* set in the 19th Century West Africa than about the Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* which is set in ancient Rome. They understood and related better to the setting of the Soyinkan play. Some of the problems they encountered in appreciating the setting of the Shakespearean play included a difficulty in differentiating between Greek and Roman references, a lack of knowledge of the link between ancient Rome and ancient Greece and a problem explaining, and by extension, picturing Roman armour and weaponry. While these problems plus the others already discussed in depth in this analysis did affect their appreciation of the play somewhat, the researcher believes that they could not be said to hamper their appreciation seriously.

## Language Knowledge

Studies on reading comprehension, like Stahl et al. (1989) and Spivey and King (1989), usually restrict their consideration of language to an examination of vocabulary. However, as the sample "A" level paper (see Appendix A) illustrates, imagery is one of the more important aspects of language usually considered in literary appreciation. Therefore, the researcher examined diction (the literary appreciation synonym for vocabulary) and imagery in his study of the participants' language knowledge of the plays.

Although the researcher was primarily interested in the participants' reaction to the diction and imagery, he approached the issue of language in the plays with an open question to discover whether the participants were interested in discussing other aspects. This strategy proved very productive:

> WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY?
>
> MUN: The language of the play. O.K., at first it seemed long-winded, with a lot of proverbs, actually not making sense because you didn't know why those things were said. But later on the language became rather alive. It's present English, it's used, it's rampant. So when you read it...and it's so artistically manipulated that the words...his choice and use of words are very effective, especially in the dialogue among the girls when they were imitating the whites "Oh how are you?", "How's the weather?", you know, mimicking the whites. It was so realistic, so funny.

Muniratu's response provides a wealth of information about her reaction to the language of *Death and the King's Horseman*. Apparently, the language is very familiar and she can relate to it very easily. Also she shares the playwright's sense of humour and it is his language which makes the scenes he portrays "so realistic, so funny" for her. On the whole she is enthusiastic about the play's language. She was much less enthusiastic about the language of *Coriolanus*. Surpetta, however, took an opposite position in her reactions to both plays. Her reaction to *Coriolanus* is illustrative:

> WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY?
>
> SUR: Well, it's the easiest to read, the language, of all the Shakespearean plays I've read. There are no really long speeches, no very complicated lines. In fact I read the book without looking at the footnotes. I could understand all of it.

It must be pointed out, however, that Surpetta does not necessarily relate to the language of the play, she merely finds it easy to read. Even the ease with which she could understand the language of the play is comparative not to the Soyinkan play but to other Shakespearean plays. Also, Surpetta's difficulty with the Soyinkan play was largely due to the difficulty she experienced in interpreting certain proverbs and riddles employed at the start of the play.

The language of *Death and the King's Horseman* is complicated in the sense that there are actually three languages in use in the play. The colonialists speak standard English, their Yoruba policemen and servants speak Pidgin English (which is very similar to Krio), and the Yoruba speak to each other in Yoruba. This situation is further complicated by the speeches of the Yoruba people being written in English but with clues like proverbs, riddles, and a sprinkling of Yoruba words included to indicate to the astute reader that these speeches should be assumed to be in Yoruba. The researcher was pleasantly surprised to discover that all the participants understood this complicated linguistic mixture quite clearly, and took it in their stride when reading the play. The following extract is illustrative:

O.K., NOW I'M GOING TO ASK WHAT YOU MIGHT THINK IS A STUPID QUESTION. WHAT LANGUAGE IS THE PLAY WRITTEN IN?

YEM: Well English of course. But there are some parts that Amusa speaks—I don't know if it's Nigerian Krio—but he does direct translation. I noticed there are some misconstructions in his language.

DO YOU THINK ELESIN IS EDUCATED?

YEM: No, I don't. I think Wole Soyinka wrote it in English just so we could get the meaning, be able to read it. Look at people like Iyaloja, I don't think she can speak English and in the book she speaks it well, more than Amusa.

SO WHAT DO YOU THINK IS HAPPENING THERE?

YEM: Well, I think the exchanges between them are in their language, whether it is Yoruba or whatever, but the author puts it in English so we can get it.

The researcher believes that the participants' linguistic background, in which each of them used at least two languages and switched from one to another as the circumstances demanded, was largely responsible not only for their ability to understand what was happening linguistically in the play, but also for their ability to take it in stride. This is an excellent example of how important background knowledge, or more specifically, background knowledge of linguistic patterns, affect students' literary appreciation.

### *Diction*

For his exploration of the participants' understanding of the plays' diction, the researcher examined their reactions to a total of 20 words and phrases, 15 from *Death and the King's Horseman* and five from *Coriolanus*. While this selection was unevenly distributed between the two plays, it did serve the researcher's purpose since he was more interested in obtaining a balance between African diction and English diction. He achieved this balance by selecting 10

African words and phrases and 5 English words and phrases from *Death and the King's Horseman* and 5 English words and phrases from *Coriolanus*.

Most of the English words and phrases selected were ones frequently used in contemporary English. Obsolete words and phrases were avoided for the most part since these were usually defined and explained in footnotes to the play. Also, the researcher selected mostly Yoruba words for his examination of African diction. Only one Pidgin English word was included in this category. The following were the English words and phrases selected: pike, hurt behind, usury, spire, crab-tree, (from *Coriolanus*), tango, bluster, handicap, pecking order, and commie (from *Death and the King's Horseman*). The following African words and phrases were selected: Elegbara, Ogun, awusa nut, agbada, oba, araba, mallam, Koran, Ifa, comot.

Three tables of the participants' reactions to the diction of the plays appear below. Tables 1 and 2 list the selected English and African diction, show whether or not each participant understood each item, and in some cases include the researcher's comments. Table 3 is a summary of the words and phrases from each category understood by each of the participants.

Muniratu and Surpetta could understand almost all the African words and phrases. In contrast, Yema only understood half of them. It is possible that Yema has less knowledge of Yoruba and Pidgin vocabulary because she spent the first four years of her life in Scotland and several subsequent years in Eastern Africa. All three participants fared poorly with the English words and phrases. This disparity illustrates several things. First, it shows that the participants understood more of the African diction even though virtually all the items were from Yoruba, which is not a Sierra Leonean language and which none of the participants speak. There are several means through which the participants might have acquired the meanings of the words. These will be described because they also illustrate the link between Nigerian and Sierra Leonean culture in general, and Yoruba and Krio culture in particular. As a result of the link between Yoruba and Krio culture certain Yoruba words, like agbada, have become part of Krio vocabulary. Also, because Islam is one of the major religions in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the participants are

**Table 1. Students' Understanding of English Diction**

| Word/phrase | Play | Linguistic Source | Student | Understanding | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| pike | *Coriolanus* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| hurt behind | *Coriolanus* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | Yes | Got meaning from context |
| usury | *Coriolanus* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| spire | *Coriolanus* | English | Muniratu | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | Yes | Knew word before |
| crab-tree | *Coriolanus* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| tango | *Death* | English | Muniratu | No | But all three understood from context that it is a dance form |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| bluster | *Death* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| handicap | *Death* | English | Muniratu | No | All three gave wrong definition |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| pecking order | *Death* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| commie | *Death* | English | Muniratu | No | |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |

**Table 2. Students' Understanding of African Diction**

| Word/phrase | Play | Linguistic Source | Student | Understanding | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elegbara | *Death* | Yoruba | Muniratu | Yes | Got meaning from context |
| | | | Surpetta | No | Vague meaning from context |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| Ogun | *Death* | Yoruba | Muniratu | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Yema | Yes | Knew word before |
| awasu nut | *Death* | Yoruba | Muniratu | Yes | Got meaning from context |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| agbada | *Death* | Yoruba, Pidgin, and Krio | Muniratu | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Yema | No | Surprising: in Krio vocabulary |
| comot | *Death* | Pidgin, and Krio | Muniratu | Yes | The word is in Krio vocabulary |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | |
| | | | Yema | Yes | |
| oba | *Death* | Yoruba | Muniratu | Yes | All three knew the word before |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | |
| | | | Yema | Yes | |
| araba | *Death* | Yoruba | Muniratu | No | None could get meaning from context |
| | | | Surpetta | No | |
| | | | Yema | No | |
| mallam | *Death* | Muslim | Muniratu | Yes | She is a Muslim |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Yema | Yes | Knew word before |
| Koran | *Death* | Muslim | Muniratu | Yes | She is a Muslim |
| | | | Surpetta | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Yema | Yes | Knew word before |
| Ifa | *Death* | Yoruba | Muniratu | Yes | Knew word before |
| | | | Surpetta | No | Neither could get meaning from context |
| | | | Yema | No | |

**Table 3. Summary of Students' Understanding of Diction**

| Student | African Diction (10) | | English Diction (10) | | Total (20) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | correct | wrong | correct | wrong | correct | wrong |
| Muniratu | 9 | 1 | 1 | 9 | 10 | 10 |
| Surpetta | 8 | 2 | 1 | 9 | 9 | 11 |
| Yema | 5 | 5 | 2 | 8 | 7 | 13 |

familiar with such words as mallam and Koran. Finally, Pidgin English and Krio share much of the same vocabulary including the word "comot".

Muniratu and Surpetta were familiar with almost all the African words and phrases. In contrast, Yema only understood 5 of the 10 words and phrases. It is possible that Yema has less knowledge of Yoruba and Krio vocabulary because she spent the first four years of her life in Scotland and ten years subsequently in Eastern Africa. All three participants fared poorly with the English words and phrases.

The disparity between the participants' understanding of English and African diction is illustrative of two interrelated points made by Steffinson and Colker (cited in Aron, 1986). First, they point out that "through membership in a culture, an individual has privileged information which is represented in a rich system of schemata" (p. 2). There is a link between Nigerian and Sierra Leonean culture in general and Yoruba and Krio culture in particular. As a result of the link between Yoruba and Krio culture, certain Yoruba words like "agbada" have become part of Krio vocabulary. Also, because Islam is one of the major religions in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the participants are familiar with such words as "mallam" and "Koran." Finally, Pidgin English and Krio share much of the same vocabulary, including words like "comot." Thus, because the participants are part of the Nigerian-Sierra Leonean culture, they have knowledge of Yoruba and Pidgin English vocabulary.

Steffinson and Collier's second point is that "sometimes there is a mismatch between the background knowledge presupposed by the text and the background knowledge possessed by the reader" (p. 130). When the participants speak or write English, it is almost always formal English so though it is unlikely that they do not know what a communist is, they are unfamiliar with "commie" which is used in *Death and the King's Horseman* and with the connotations of aversion and hostility it carries. Also, while it is possible that their grandparents might have danced the tango during the heyday of ballroom dancing in Freetown, the participants, who are part of the breakdancing, skanking generation, have no idea how the tango is danced. Finally, the participants were aware that the Romans used spears but were unfamiliar with "pike," which Shakespeare uses as a synonym for spear in *Coriolanus*.

Lebauer (1985) identifies lexical difficulties as one of the sources of problems readers experience in understanding comprehension passages. He points out, for example, that "knowing a word means knowing the many different meanings associated with the word, e.g. cleave means both 'to join' and 'to separate'" (p. 139). In *Death and the King's Horseman* the word "handicap" is used to mean the disadvantage imposed on a contestant, as in a game of golf. When asked to give the meaning of the word in the context in which it was used, all the participants said it referred to something lacking in the person being addressed or to a physical disability. While their responses were accurate definitions of "handicap," they were not accurate definitions of the word as used in the context of the play. In this example of readers experiencing lexical difficulties, the participants apparently knew only two of the several different meanings associated with the word.

In all the above cases, the participants' appreciation of the play is adversely affected by their failure to understand or their misunderstanding of the playwright's diction. However, their appreciation was not affected radically. For example, even though they did not understand how the tango is danced, the participants did surmise that the Pilkings would appear ludicrous doing a ballroom dance while dressed in the costume of an African mask. Also, although they did not understand specifically what a commie was, they all had the general impression that the reference was to an agitator of some sort.

### *Imagery*

The researcher solicited the participants' reactions to figures of speech like similes, metaphors, personification, etc. in both plays and such elements as proverbs and riddles in *Death and the King's Horseman.*

All the participants found the opening scene of *Death and the King's Horseman* difficult to understand since it was a scene in which the characters speak in verse and in which Elesin, the praise singer, and Iyaloja converse in verse using proverbs and extended riddles as Elesin makes his way jauntily through the market place for the last time. As the following extract reveals, Surpetta found it difficult to understand the poetic language employed in this scene:

> CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF SOME OF THESE ELEMENTS THAT YOU FOUND DIFFICULT?
>
> SUR: [leafs through the play then reads]
>
> Elesin Oba! Are you
> not that man who looked out of doors that stormy day
> The god of luck limped by, drenched
> To the very lice that held
> His rags together? You took pity upon
> His sores and wished him fortune.
> Fortune was footloose this dawn, he replied,
> Till you trapped him in a heartfelt wish
> That now returns to you. Elesin Oba!

I say you are that man who

Chanced upon the calabash of honour

You thought it was palm wine and

Drained its contents to the final drop.

YOU FOUND THAT PASSAGE DIFFICULT.

SUR: Yes, it's very difficult and there are a lot more of this sort.

IS IT THE REFERENCES THAT HE MAKES THAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND? I MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT A CALABASH IS, FOR EXAMPLE?

SUR: Well, it's not that really. It's the [pause] the topic he is talking about. Like he's talking of the god of fortune going by drenched to the very lice that held his rags together....You know, I actually don't know what he's talking about or what he's referring to. I mean, to understand it, you have to read it for some time to understand what it means.

The essence of the praise singer's lyric speech is that Elesin has been fortunate to enjoy a life of prestige, luxury and honour. For Surpetta, however, this essential message is elusive, "hidden" in the lyrical, image-laden language, with the references to and description of the god of luck and the calabash of honour etc.

Some of the riddles used by the characters, especially Elesin, also created problems for the participants:

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ABOUT THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY?

YEM: Well, some parts of it are easy to understand, easy grammar etc., but when Elesin speaks, especially, he uses a lot of riddles, and I find it hard to understand what he is trying to say in some instances. I had to read it over and over again. In some cases I just couldn't understand.

LIKE WHICH ONE?

YEM: [finds and points to passage in text] The whole thing here is not clear to me.

SO THE IDEA OF THE "NOT I BIRD..."

YEM: Is not clear to me. It wasn't clear to the praise singer either!

All the participants found it difficult to understand the riddle of the "Not I Bird," the fictitious bird Elesin's witty brain conjures up as a symbol of death, a bird that no one will acknowledge seeing or hearing (hence "Not I") since a visit from this bird heralds one's death. The riddle is supposed to be extremely difficult to interpret. In fact it completely baffles the praise singer, who is a professional riddle coiner. Elesin explains the riddle by giving several long, derisive illustrations of how everyone except himself avoids acknowledging the presence of the Not I Bird. Even though the praise singer finally understands the riddle, it is hardly surprising that the participants do not. As the praise singer comments in admiration, "Elesin's riddles are not merely the nut in the kernel that breaks human teeth; he also buries the kernel in hot embers and dares a man's fingers to draw it out" (p. 11). The participants pointed out, however, that they understand most of the other riddles in the play.

In most cases, the participants were able to fully understand the imagery that involved African elements in *Death and the King's Horseman*. The following extract in which Muniratu explains a speech in which the praise singer describes and cajoles Elesin as the horseman slips into a trance is illustrative:

O.K., NOW LET'S LOOK AT ONE PARTICULAR IMAGE ON PAGE 44 HE SAYS...THIS IS THE PRAISE SINGER TALKING TO ELESIN. HE SAYS [reads] "ELESIN ALAFIN, DON'T THINK I DO NOT KNOW WHY YOUR LIMBS ARE HEAVY, WHY YOUR LIMBS ARE DROWSY AS PALM OIL IN THE COLD OF HARMATTAN." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

MUN: That he as the drummer knows why Elesin has been in this sort of mood. Why he has become downcast and seems to be in a trance.

SO WHAT LITERALLY DOES IT MEAN WHEN HE SAYS THAT HIS LIMBS ARE DROWSY AS PALM OIL IN THE COLD OF HARMATTAN?

MUN: That he is becoming cold, sort of stiff...because palm oil in the Harmattan....You know in the Harmattan the place is chilly and then to have palm oil which when it's sunny melted and flows, in the harmattan it settles, sets sort of. It congeals to a hard chunk. So to have the limbs of the Oba sort of becoming stiff in a hard chunk, sort of almost not showing any sign of life.

It is obvious from the extract that there is neither a cultural nor a concept gap between the elements of the imagery employed and Muniratu's background knowledge. Not only are the elements like palm oil and harmattan familiar, the whole image is one she can visualize and relate to.

The market women use the market as a metaphor for the world of the ancestors, and speak of the Elesin's imminent death, the status he will acquire in that world for arriving early, and their own eventual death and reunification in the world of the ancestors in terms of customers at a market: Surpetta has the right idea about the metaphor employed but is uncertain whether her interpretation is accurate:

LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER IMAGE HERE. ON PAGE 17 THE WOMEN SAY [reads] "WE SHALL ALL MEET AT THE GREAT MARKET WE SHALL ALL MEET AT THE GREAT MARKET HE WHO GOES EARLY TAKES THE BEST BARGAINS BUT WE SHALL MEET, AND RESUME OUR BANTER."

SUR: Yes, that was one that I did not understand.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE GREAT MARKET IS?

SUR: Maybe they are referring to the next world but I'm not sure.

WHY DO THEY SAY "HE WHO GOES EARLY GETS THE BEST BARGAINS"?

SUR: Well since I'm not sure about where they are referring to, I couldn't answer that question properly.

Surpetta's uncertainty about the meaning of the essence of the extended metaphor seriously hampers her willingness and ability to interpret the other aspects of the metaphor. Both Muniratu and Yema, however, understood the metaphor and were able to interpret it.

The participants were far less comfortable with Shakespeare's imagery. When the victorious Roman army hails Coriolanus as hero of the battle in Act 1, scene 9 of *Coriolanus*, by throwing their caps and lances into the air, the embarrassed Coriolanus reminds them that weapons were made for fighting not flattery in an effort to get them to stop what he considers their excessive flattery. As the following extract reveals, Muniratu does not understand the individual simile employed nor the essential message of the speech:

> CORIOLANUS SAYS (reads) "MAY THESE SAME INSTRUMENTS, WHICH YOU PROFANE, NEVER SOUND MORE! WHEN DRUMS AND TRUMPETS SHALL I THE FIELD PROVE FLATTERERS, LET COURTS AND CITIES BE MADE ALL OF FALSE–FACED SOOTHING! WHEN STEEL GROWS SOFT AS PARASITE'S SILK, LET HIM BE MADE AN OVERTURE FOR THE WARS!" WHAT DOES HE MEAN BY SAYING "WHEN STEEL GROWS SOFT AS THE PARASITE'S SILK, LET HIM BE MADE AN OVERTURE FOR THE WARS"?
>
> MUN: Well, it's the feelings that he is talking of, the feelings of the plebians when they were shouting and praising him. [pause].
>
> WHAT IS HE TALKING ABOUT WHEN HE TALKS ABOUT STEEL?
>
> MUN: Steel? It's the arms.
>
> WHAT ARMS?
>
> MUN: The arms that are used in war–like irons, bows and arrows, and knives and swords. Guns were not used then.
>
> WHEN HE SAYS "WHEN STEEL GROWS SOFT AS PARASITE'S SILK." WHAT DOES HE MEAN?

MUN: Well, well. He's talking about when arms are laid down...a sort of peace reigns.

WHY DOES HE REFER TO STEEL AS PARASITE'S SILK?

MUN: Parasite's silk is silk that has been damaged, damaged in a bad manner. It was sort of fed on by parasites.

The images in this case were not only from an alien, culture but also from another era, and these factors probably contributed to the failure of Muniratu and the other participants' to understand let alone relate to the imagery in this speech.

In some cases the participants were able to discern the message of a speech even though they could not understand let alone visualize the imagery employed. When the Roman army returns to Rome triumphant, Coriolanus' old friend Meninius points out that, even though all of Rome should be celebrating their victory, the jealous and vindictive tribunes are not pleased and will not join in the celebrations:

LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THE IMAGERY. PAGE 66—MEMINUIS SAYS "YOU ARE THREE THAT ROME SHOULD DOTE ON; YET, BY THE FAITH OF MEN, WE HAVE SOME OLD CRAB-TREES HERE AT HOME THAT WILL NOT BE GRAFTED TO YOUR RELISH." WHAT IS HE SAYING THERE?

SUR: Well, I can grasp a bit of the meaning. He was saying that Rome should be proud of Coriolanus and the others but some particular set of people would not like to be.

AND WHO WAS HE...

SUR: I'm sure he was referring to the tribunes.

WHY DOES HE CALL THEM CRAB-TREES? WHAT IS A CRAB-TREE?

SUR: I don't know.

O.K. WHAT IS GRAFTING? HE SAYS "THEY WILL NOT BE GRAFTED TO YOUR RELISH."

SUR: [pause] I can't tell.

The extract illustrates that in this case Surpetta is able to discern the message of the speech but cannot appreciate the imagery in an affective sense since she does not understand the imagery employed. Thus her appreciation of the speech is seriously hampered yet this fact only became evident when she was asked to explain individual aspects of the imagery employed. The researcher wonders how much of the "A" level literature Surpetta and other "A" level students attempt to interpret with only a "grasp of a bit of the meaning" rather than a full understanding, and with little possibility of appreciating the wit, beauty and aptness of the imagery employed.

## Summary

The analysis in this chapter demonstrates that there appears to be a close link between culture and the participants' ability to understand both diction and imagery in the plays. When the words and images employed were culturally familiar, the participants not only understood but were able to visualize and relate to the imagery. On the other hand, when the words and images employed were culturally unfamiliar, the participants tended to understand, visualize and relate less to the imagery.

Soyinka's inclusion of non-West African imagery meant that the participants found it difficult to interpret and relate to some of the imagery in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Also, at one stage Surpetta pointed out that she did not have enough knowledge of Yoruba culture to understand all the images and references in the play. These two facts illustrate, first, that the relationship between the participants' background and the context of the text is complicated and, second, that it would be simplistic to assume that the students will understand and relate to the images in an African text simply because they are African. On the other hand, although the participants understand less of the language in *Coriolanus*, they have acquired a sufficient amount of knowledge of Shakespeare, his works, and the contexts of his plays to appreciate much of the diction and imagery employed in *Coriolanus*. Also, the participants revealed that they are sometimes able to grasp the essential meaning of certain speeches even though they could neither understand nor relate to the imagery in those speeches.

This chapter has dealt with the final aspect of the thesis, namely the participants' appreciation of the language of the two plays. The concluding chapter will summarize the findings of the thesis and present the researcher's recommendations.

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first gives a summary of the thesis design, the second summarizes the findings of the thesis, and the third outlines the implications of the findings for research and professional practice, and presents the researcher's recommendations.

### Summary of Thesis Design

This exploratory, qualitative study was designed to investigate two issues which are of great concern to the researcher. The first is the phenomenon of students' poor performance in the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) "A" level literature examinations. The second is the researcher's interest in the role the interaction between students' backgrounds and the contexts of literature texts plays in students' appreciation of texts. The thesis has united these two issues by exploring the relationship between students' backgrounds and the contexts of works of literature. Specifically, it has focused on the relationship between the backgrounds of a sample of students in a selected Sierra Leonean sixth form literature class and the context of two plays, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, which had been prescribed in previous "A" level literature syllabi. The researcher drew on studies, essays and books from such diverse areas as schema theory, cross-cultural studies and literature appreciation in his examination of the two, interrelated issues treated in the thesis.

The study had three purposes. First, it attempted to discover what the participants felt about literature in general and "A" level literature in particular, second, whether or not the participants possessed the appropriate content and language schemata necessary to understand and critically analyze "A" level drama texts, and third, whether the differences between the students' backgrounds and the contexts of the drama texts adversely affect the students' appreciation of the texts.

Participants for the study were three "A" level literature students aged 18 to 19 at a secondary school in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The participants were selected to represent a variety of ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, English literature aptitude levels, and degrees of exposure to foreign societies. Data for the study were collected through three taped in-depth interviews with each of the participants. The data were analyzed to identify themes and patterns which were later discussed in the analysis chapters.

Students were selected as participants for this study because the researcher was interested in eliciting their perspectives on the issues under consideration. The WAEC report (1985), which investigated the phenomenon of students' poor performance in "A" level literature examinations, had solicited responses from teachers and examiners but not from students of literature. The researcher felt that students ought to have been consulted since they are not only experts in their own right but also the group most directly affected by the problem. The study therefore documents "A" level literature students' views in depth, so giving them a "voice" in such an important matter as their education. Secondly, the researcher considered present "A" level students were an ideal group through which to explore students' reactions to literature in general, and "A" level literature in particular and the relationship between students background and the contexts of texts.

### Findings

The study made findings in such areas as the effects of the participants' prior knowledge about literature in general, their affective response to literature in general and "A" level literature in particular, and their interaction with texts from a familiar cultural setting and those with an unfamiliar setting.

The research shows that many of the findings made in the area of reading comprehension are valid for literature appreciation also. However, much of the literature on reading comprehension that was reviewed in chapter 2 has not been drawn in again in the findings. This is because the researcher is interested in literature appreciation rather than reading comprehension. The literature on reading comprehension is relevant mainly in the sense that it provided some of the language and concepts, in essence the tools, that were used to construct the present study. In instances where the literature on reading comprehension appeared particularly relevant to the findings, such literature has been drawn in.

### *Effects of Prior Knowledge*

One of the findings of the thesis was that the participants had had considerable experience appreciating literary works from a variety of periods, genres, cultural backgrounds, and writers. In fact, all the participants had studied other works by both Shakespeare and Soyinka before being asked to read *Coriolanus* and *Death and the King's Horseman.* This past experience has ensured, first, that the participants are accustomed to appreciating diverse works of literature and, second, that they could draw on their prior knowledge of the two authors and their works in appreciating the two plays. However, the research also shows that the participants had only read one work by a Sierra Leonean author. This means they have little experience appreciating works of literature based on their own culture.

### *Affective Response to Literature*

Another significant finding was the participants' love for literature and their perception of the subject as unique and special. It was striking that all the original seven participants expressed a love for literature and identified it as their favourite subject. Also, they studied literature in more relaxed and more creative ways than other subjects. This love for literature was the primary reason why the participants were offering the subject at "A" level (some of them in spite of the fact that they felt it had no relevance to their future careers). This strong, positive attitude to literature is due, at least in part, to the participants' earlier, positive experiences with the subject. However, their confidence in their aptitude for the subject is being affected significantly and adversely by their experiences as students of "A" level literature. It is interesting, though, that while they feel less secure and confident in their ability to perform well in "A" level literature texts and examinations, their love for the subject remains steadfast.

All the participants expressed a preference for African literature over European literature. They said they enjoyed African works more because they found them more realistic and could relate better to the themes, traditions, and characters portrayed in them than to those in European works. However, they did indicate that they enjoyed reading about the alien cultures presented in European literature.

### *A-Level Literature*

As far as "A" level literature is concerned, the study explored the participants' responses to the following issues: a comparison between the levels of analysis required at "A" level and "O" level literature, the way literature is taught at "A" level, changes the participants would like to see in the way literature is taught and importance of the examination in the participants' attitude to literature. The participants' observations underscore the WAEC report's conclusion that the "A" level literature syllabus is extensively and intensively demanding. The participants mention such factors as the large number of texts they have to read and the depth of analysis required from them. They find the extensiveness and intensiveness of "A" level literature difficult to cope with, especially since these factors constitute an inordinately large gap between "O" level and "A" level literature (another factor mentioned in the WAEC report).

The participants underscored many of the points made by the WAEC report, for example the gap between "O" and "A" level literature, the gap between the expectations of "A" level literature teachers and students' actual capabilities, the fact that "O" level literature does not prepare students for "A" level literature etc.. However, they also brought up other factors which they felt were responsible for the difficulty of "A" level literature. These included the change from school-type teaching to lecture-type teaching, the pace at which material is covered, and peer pressure to drop the subject. Because they have not yet taken their "A" levels, the participants were not asked specific questions about the "A" level literature examinations. However, their observations about "A" level literature outline the problems students have with "A" level literature in general and which consequently translate into students' poor performance in the examinations. Also, it appears that the problems they have outlined have culminated in some of their classmates dropping literature and they themselves approaching the examinations with uncertainty and grim determination rather than confidence in their aptitude for literature. To alleviate these problems, the participants advocated for mixed group activity, tutorial groups, increased student input in classroom text analysis, and moving literature classes to earlier time periods. The researcher was struck by the practicality, viability, and potential usefulness of the suggestions made.

### *Participants' Interaction With Texts*

For its exploration of the relationship between the participants' background and the contexts of the selected drama texts and the role this relationship plays in the participants' appreciation of the texts, the study examined both cognitive factors such as content and language knowledge and affective factors such as cultural and individual values, beliefs, perspectives and emotional reaction.

From an examination of the participants' reactions to the cultural issues portrayed in the two plays, it was evident that they were able to understand and relate better to the cultural aspects of the more culturally familiar Soyinkan play than those of the Shakespearean play. The participants were able to produce more insightful, informed, analytical and emotional responses to the traditions that were more familiar. In contrast, there was evidence of the cultural and concept gaps between student and text mentioned by Obah (1983), in their responses to culturally unfamiliar traditions. The findings, therefore, provide empirically tested proof of Obah's assertions which appear to be based purely on heuristic knowledge. The result of the cultural and concept gap was that the participants understood those traditions less, made more vague and less insightful comments about them, and in some cases had no emotional reaction to them. However, they sometimes had strong views on traditions that were not familiar and which they did not fully understand. This was an indication that cognitive and affective reaction do not always coincide.

The participants' unfamiliarity with some of the Yoruba traditions portrayed in *Death and the King's Horseman* was an indication that while Nigerian and Sierra Leonean cultures are similar, they are not identical. Consequently, the context of the text was familiar but not identical to the participants' cultural background. This in turn illustrates that it is simplistic to divide texts into those with familiar and those with unfamiliar contexts since there are degrees of familiarity.

The research showed that the participants were sometimes able to understand and form viewpoints on unfamiliar traditions through an examination of the context in which the tradition is presented. Also, they sometimes allowed what they perceived as the playwrights' perspective to guide their emotional reaction to the tradition presented. In other instances they imposed meanings of cultural aspects from their own background knowledge on the actual unfamiliar traditions presented in the plays.

As educated Sierra Leoneans, the participants are at least bilingual, and in some cases are multilingual. They live in an environment which requires them to switch back and forth between two or more languages every day. These two factors made it easy for them to understand the use of several languages and the switching from one language to another in *Death and the King's Horseman*, and to take this linguistic complexity in their stride.

On the whole, the participants understood and related better to the language of *Death and the King's Horseman*. However, they found the language of the opening scene of the play very difficult because the characters spoke in verse and employed particularly difficult riddles and convoluted language to make their points. The researcher examined their reactions to the proverbs and riddles used in the play as part of his exploration of their responses to the imagery of the plays. He found that apart from the particularly difficult riddles in the opening scene, the participants understood most of the riddles and proverbs. On the whole, they understood and related better to the African imagery in *Death and the Kings Horseman* than the western imagery in both plays.

The researcher observed similar patterns in the participants' responses to the diction and imagery in the plays, the two aspects of language knowledge examined. The cultural and linguistic ties that exist between Nigerian and Sierra Leone in general and Yoruba, Pidgin, and Krio in particular meant that the participants were familiar with and able to understand some of the Yoruba and all the Pidgin English diction employed in *Death and the King's Horseman.* They were unfamiliar with and less able to understand both the contemporary English diction employed in *Death and the King's Horseman* and the Elizabethan English employed in *Coriolanus.*

Of the diction selected for examination, the participants understood more of the Yoruba and Pidgin diction than both the contemporary English in *Death and the King's Horseman* and the Elizabethan English in *Coriolanus.* There was evidence of what Lebauer (1985), describes as lexical difficulties in the participants' responses to the diction in the plays. When asked to give definitions of words with several meanings, the participants sometimes gave definitions which, though they were the accurate definitions of the words, were inaccurate since they were the wrong meaning of the words in the context in which they were used.

The participants' inability to understand some of the diction employed in the two plays was indication of the gap Olson (1987) points out, sometimes exists between the scope of literacy of the text and the reader. This gap did hamper the participants' ability to understand and critically analyze specific sections of the texts. However, it did not appear to hinder considerably the participants' appreciation of the texts in their entirety.

The research showed that the participants had enough of the relevant content and language knowledge to understand the selected "A" level texts. It also revealed that the cultural and language aspects they had the most problems with were those from an alien culture. Thus, differences between the cultural background of the participants and the context of *Coriolanus* did hinder their ability to understand the text. Finally, the mixture of African and European cultural and language aspects in *Death and the King's Horseman* illustrates the complexity of the concept of context familiarity.

## Implications of Findings and Recommendations

The wealth of information provided by the participants justifies the researcher's assertion that students are experts in their own right and ought to have been solicited by WAEC for its examination of the phenomenon of students' poor performance in "A" level literature examinations. The participants' responses have shed new light not only on students' perspective on this phenomenon, but also on their attitude to literature in general and "A" level literature in particular. Also, they have provided ample and interesting information on the relationship between readers' backgrounds and the contexts of texts and the effect of this relationship on readers' ability to appreciate works of literature.

In his article in which he advocates the study of multicultural literature, Knight (1989), points out that "it's more appropriate today to offer a world view of knowledge rather than one limited to the horizons of one's own nation" (p. 55). The experiences of the participants in the present study illustrate that they are unlikely to become students whose literary horizons are limited to their nation. The diversity of works they have studied makes it more likely that they are in the process of acquiring a rounded, extensive, universal knowledge of literature, the more desirable world view of knowledge Knight advocates.

However, the research also shows that the participants had only read one work by a Sierra Leonean. This means that they had been denied the opportunity to appreciate their own culture as reflected in the works of other Sierra Leoneans. They had also been given the silent yet strong message that works of literature by Sierra Leonean writers, and by implication works about Sierra Leone, are unworthy of their attention as literary critics. The exclusion of Sierra Leonean works from school literature syllabi has the potential effect,therefore, of undermining the students' love and respect for their own culture.

This researcher believes there is an urgent need to include more works by Sierra Leonean authors in Sierra Leonean secondary school syllabi. This will yield many and diverse positive results. For example, it will give students the opportunity to see aspects of their culture through the eyes of other Sierra Leoneans, to examine these depictions and formulate their own perspectives on their culture. It will also provide aspiring writers among them with local role models. The present research shows that the participants preferred texts with culturally familiar contexts to those with culturally unfamiliar contexts. If they understand, relate to and have strong emotional reactions to works with cultural contexts that are similar to their own background, then it is reasonable to conclude that they will understand even more of, relate even better to, and have even stronger emotional reactions when the cultural contexts of the texts are identical to their own backgrounds. Obah (1982), advocates that students be given the opportunity to read and study literature about their country and by writers of the same nationality. she points out that such literature, which she describes as ethnic literature, has the power to revive dormant imaginations and encourage positive reading habits "through its quality of being what I call, reassuring, familiar, and unthreatening" (p. 50). These are additional, related advantages to including ethnic literature in schools' literature syllabi.

Two interrelated findings of the study are first, that the participants are well aware of the difficulty of "A" level literature examinations and are very anxious to avoid failing and second, that there is a radical change in their approach to literature from confidence in their aptitude for literature prior to sixth form to insecurity and grim determination at the sixth form level. These interrelated findings illustrate that there is a dire need to maintain students love and enthusiasm for the subject as well as their confidence in their aptitude for the subject after "O" level.

Making changes in the way "A" level literature is taught is one of the means through which these problems could be addressed. First, measures need to be taken to ensure that students acquire knowledge of the technical aspects of literature they need to undertake "A" level literature. This can be done by placing more emphasis on those aspects at the "O" level. In other words, the "O" level literature should be redesigned or the teaching emphasis altered to ensure that "O" level literature prepares students for "A" level literature. Alternatively, students could be provided with remedial or extra classes which would concentrate on these technical aspects during the first year of the "A" level programme. Second, the transition from school-type teaching to lecture-type teaching should be made more gradual and its purpose explained to students. Third, group activity and peer tutoring could be implemented or increased since some of the participants have not only indicated a desire to have more control over their learning but have organized informal, out of class group discussions. Finally, less emphasis should be put on the examinations and more on the students' enjoyment of literature and their development as students of literature.

The researcher endorses many of the recommendations of the WAEC report, including the following: the scope of the "A" level literature syllabus should be reduced, the number of "A" level literature classes should be increased, emphasis should be placed on instructing students on how to answer questions, examiners' reports on the performance of candidates in "A" level literature examinations should be made use of by the teachers, universities and other appropriate bodies should carry out research into the teaching of English Literature in secondary schools. He feels these and other recommendations would contribute significantly towards alleviating the problem of students' poor performance in "A" level literature examinations.

However, the researcher finds some of the recommendations vague or worse still, cannot agree with them. For example, the researcher found little evidence of the "nonchalant attitude" towards the subject which the report recommends students "shelve". Even if this attitude did exist among other sets of students, the researcher considers the recommendation that students "shelve" it, both an inappropriate and an inadequate response. Steps should be taken to discover how, when, and why students developed this attitude, and concrete recommendations must be made to make the subject more appealing to such students. Also, the report points out that "some teachers need to change their teaching techniques. Teaching of A/L English Literature demands more than just reading the texts in class" (p. 8). While it is true that some teachers need to change their teaching techniques, the report has provided no details about the type of changes that should be made. The participants in the present study and the researcher have outlined some of the changes that would prove useful.

The study brings up several potential issues for further research. For example, the issue of the relationship between the sex of students and their aptitude for and interest in literature needs to be explored. Are such factors as female students' greater interest in, and enthusiasm for literature, their dominance of the teacher's attention in class and self proclaimed greater aptitude for literature restricted to the particular class of students observed or is the class typical of "A" level literature classes in Sierra Leone? Is literature being perceived by male and female students as a girls' subject? Another issue that could be investigated is whether or not students in rural areas have different knowledge from the urban students used in the present study, and whether they have different perspectives on and levels of content and language knowledge from urban students.

In order not only to understand the phenomenon of students' poor performance in literature but also the appropriateness of "A" level literature for Sierra Leonean students, all facets of "A" level literature need to be opened up to scrutiny. The researcher feels students' poor performance should not be considered a self contained phenomenon but rather as a problem that arises out of the status quo of literature education in Sierra Leone. In other words, the question "why are students doing poorly in 'A' level literature?" can only be answered fully after the broader and more significant question "what literature do we teach our children and why?" has been answered.

Other researchers interested in the problems students are experiencing with "A" level literature should examine issues such as the aim of the "A" level literature syllabus, examination questions, marking standards, university entrance requirements for literature students. Clients of the "A" level literature syllabus such as present and past students and their parents, as well as teachers, markers, and the designers of the "A" level literature need to be consulted. In other words the researcher believes that investigating students' performance, as the WAEC study does, only addresses one aspect of a complex situation. Furthermore, soliciting responses only from teachers and examiners restricts the quality and diversity of responses to the situation that could be obtained. The study presented in this thesis brings a fresh perspective to the issue by soliciting responses from students. It therefore contributes to the understanding of the problem. However, it should be considered as one of several studies involving one group out of many that need to be solicited to fully understand the problems associated with "A" level literature.

The researcher feels that many of the findings and recommendations of this thesis are probably valid not only for Sierra Leonean "A" level students, but for students of literature in general. For example, the participants' ability to understand and relate better to West African texts than to English texts is primarily because they find the contexts and contents of West African texts familiar. English students would almost certainly understand and relate better to English works than West African works because they find the contexts and contents of English works more familiar.

The title of this study poses the question "What is Shakespeare doing in my hut?" It is apparent from the research that Shakespeare is there to tell students about his and other societies and periods in history. He is there to make sure that students do not study literature from their own culture only but rather that they acquire a wide, rounded knowledge of literature. The research shows that while students may not understand fully Shakespeare's language or the culture and period he portrays in his plays, he has been living in their "hut" long enough for them to be comfortable with his presence and for them to have acquired enough knowledge about his language and the cultures and periods he portrays to undervalue "A" level literature.

While the research provides an answer to the question "What is Shakespeare doing in my hut?", it opens up further questions. For example, "What is Shakespeare doing in my hut when Sarif Easmon (a Sierra Leonean writer) is out in the rain?", "How close a relative is Soyinka?", and "Why am I being taught only in Shakespeare's language and being punished for speaking my mother's?" Hopefully, these and other questions arising from the study will be addressed in the future by this researcher and others.

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# Appendix A. SAMPLE A-LEVEL EXAMINATION PAPER

A 211 Nov.
G.C.E.A. 1984
ENGLISH LITERATURE 1
Drama
3 hours

## THE WEST AFRICAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

**General Certificate of Education Examination**

**Advanced Level**

November 1984 ENGLISH LITERATURE 1 3 hours

### DRAMA

*Answer* **four** *questions in all: Questions* **1** *and* **2**, *and* **two** *other questions.*

*All questions carry equal marks.*

S.A. 789 **Turn over**

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### WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Antony and Cleopatra*

**1.** Read the following two extracts.

(i) Relate each extract to its context in two or three sentences.

(ii) Render into modern English the meaning of the underlined passages in the extracts.

(iii) Comment briefly on what you find of special interest in the extracts. (You may find interesting points relating to subject-matter, or plot, or character, or diction, or imagery, or more than one of these. Discuss these and relate them to the rest of the play.)

(*a*) Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
So many mermaids, tended her i'th'eyes,
And made their bends adornings. At the helm
A seeming mermaid steers. The silken tackle
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,
That yarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
Enthroned i'th'market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling to th'air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature.

(*b*) Since Cleopatra died,
I have lived in such dishonour that the gods
Detest my baseness. I, that with my sword
Quartered the world, and o'er green Neptune's back
With ships made cities, condemn myself to lack
The courage of a woman; less noble mind
Than she which by her death our Caesar tells
'I am conqueror of myself.' Thou art sworn, Eros,
That, when the exigent should come, which now
Is come indeed, when I should see behind me
Th'inevitable prosecution of
Disgrace and horror, that on my command
Thou then wouldst kill me. Do't; the time is come.
Thou strik'st not me; 'tis Caesar thou defeat'st.
Put colour in thy cheek.

### WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Antony and Cleopatra*

2. **Either:** (*a*) How far do you agree with the view that the tragic conflict in the play arises much more from personal antagonisms than from political disagreements?

**Or:** (*b*) 'In the play several characters are placed in situations where their personal interests conflict with those of the state and their associates.' Discuss **three** situations in the play which are used to explore the concept of loyalty.

### WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

3. **Either:** (*a*) Compare the characters of Page and Ford showing what they add to the comedy and development of the play.

**Or:** (*b*) How far do you agree with the view that there are more comic situations than comic characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*?

### CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE: *The Jew of Malta*

4. **Either:** (*a*) How far is it true to say that *The Jew of Malta* is a morality play in which wickedness and injustice are punished?

**Or:** (*b*) 'Humanity debased to the point of absurdity.' Is this a true assessment of the characters in the play?

### RICHARD SHERIDAN: *The Rivals*

5. **Either:** (*a*) 'Jack Absolute represents an island of normality among unusual characters such as Lydia Languish and Faulkland.' Contrast these three characters illustrating Sheridan's skill in characterization and showing how they contribute to the success of the play.

**Or:** (*b*) 'The plot of *The Rivals* becomes more complex and improbable before it is finally resolved.' Analyse carefully Sheridan's handling of the plot, showing his competence as a comic artist in the last two acts of the play.

### ARTHUR MILLER: *Death of a Salesman*

**6. Either:** (*a*) Examine the contributions of Linda, Howard and Uncle Ben in the unfolding drama of Willy Loman's life.

**Or:** (*b*) 'Miller explores the theme of rejection in *Death of a Salesman*.' How accurate a description is this of the experiences presented in the play?

### ROBERT BOLT: *A Man For All Seasons*

**7. Either:** (*a*) 'Bolt set out to write a new kind of play.' Discuss the features that make this play 'new' and the dramatic interest it contains.

**Or:** (*b*) Examine the importance of law in the play. Discuss how More, despite his expertise in the law, is caught by it.

### EASMON: *The New Patriots*

**8. Either:** (*a*) 'A piece of social and political criticism.' Show whether this is true of the play.

**Or:** (*b*) Do you agree that the play is one-sided dramatically, has no real conflict and that everything is against the bad characters?

### JOHN PEPPER CLARK: *The Raft*

**9. Either:** (*a*) As a producer how would you present *The Raft* so as to arouse an audience's interest in its drama?

**Or:** (*b*) 'The philosophy of life expressed in the play dominates the action and the plot.' How far do you agree with this statement?

## Appendix B. SAMPLE INTERVIEW WITH MUNIRATU

The following is the second interview of the three indepth interviews conducted with one of the participants for the study. The researcher's speeches are in UPPER CASE while those of the participant are in lower case. The participant is identified more specifically by the inclusion of her chosen pseudonym at the start of each of her speeches.

THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH "MUNIRATU" ON *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN.* SO HAD YOU READ THE PLAY BEFORE I ASKED YOU TO?

MUN: No.

HAD YOU EVER HEARD OF THE PLAY, *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN* BEFORE THIS?

MUN: Never.

HAD YOU HEARD OF SOYINKA BEFORE?

MUN: [Laugh] Of course!

WHAT OTHER SOYINKAN PLAYS HAVE YOU READ?

MUN: *The Lion and the Jewel* and now *Kongi's Harvest.*

HAVE YOU READ ANY OF SOYINKA'S PLAYS FOR YOUR OWN PLEASURE?

MUN: Yes, *Kongi's Harvest* before I did it as a text, *Trials of Brother Jero, Jero's Metamorphosis*, and *Madmen and Specialists.*

THAT'S QUITE A LIST. SO WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE PLAYS?

MUN: Well, like *Madmen and Specialists*, it was elevated. There are some things I can't figure out. They were definitely above me. The level of the play—it was rather high. But like *Lion and the Jewel, Kongi's Harvest*, well— *Trials of Brother Jero* is very entertaining. *Lion and the Jewel* and *Kongi's Harvest* are to my liking and I find them very interesting.

SO AT WHAT LEVEL WOULD YOU PUT *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*?

MUN: *Death and the King's Horseman* is within my level, of course because I found it very interesting.

AND WAS IT DIFFICULT TO READ OR WAS IT...

MUN: Only at first because you didn't have any stage directions, you just plunged into the play. And there were a lot of parables and all the rest of it. It was only after that part of the play, after Mr. Pilkings came on stage, that it became rather interesting.

SO YOU DIDN'T FIND THE FIRST PART INTERESTING?

MUN: Afterwards I found it very interesting, after I had gone far into the play, when I came back to look at what Elesin Oba was saying, at the various characters, I realized it was very significant but at first it didn't make any sense.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT WHEN YOU READ THAT FIRST BIT IT WAS SO DIFFICULT FOR IT TO MAKE SENSE TO YOU? I MEAN YOU SAY WHEN YOU CAME BACK TO IT YOU WERE ABLE TO SEE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IT AND TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WAS HAPPENING. WHY DO YOU THINK IT WAS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND AT FIRST?

MUN: O.K. first of all the dialogue was limited between two people, the drummer and Elesin Oba. And these two people talked in parables.

SO YOU FOUND THE PARABLES DIFFICULT?

MUN: Difficult. And they didn't seem to have any sense of purpose or directions at first. Because we didn't have any scenery or all the rest of it. You see?

SO WHAT GENRE WOULD YOU PUT THIS PLAY UNDER?

MUN: This? I would put it under before and during the struggle...during colonial rule in Africa.

BUT WOULD YOU SAY IT WAS A TRAGEDY, A COMEDY OR WHAT?

MUN: It was a tragedy of course.

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE TRAGEDY FOR YOU?

MUN: OK. Well from the start to the end, even the shortened form of the story—what was written there. The title alone—Death, indicates that it's a tragedy. And at the end we have two main characters in the book killing themselves.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THINGS THAT ARE DEALT WITH IN THE PLAY THAT YOU FOUND PARTICULARLY INTERESTING? PERSONALLY.

MUN: Well, the clash of cultures is one. The white culture brought by the white man personified in Pilkings and his wife, and that of Elesin and the people of the village, especially Iyaloja who personified the women. They had their own culture which they understood, were guided by, and adhered to. When the whites came they thought everything was barbaric, chaotic and all the rest of it. And then there was the struggle between life and death. Life on the hand of the whites trying to preserve a a life which they didn't know the essence of. Actually they thought they were preserving life but in actual fact they were preserving death. And then there were the villagers who were preserving life because if their king didn't have his horseman he would be roaming around so he needed his horseman. And there was a clash of opinions of course, as well as societies, the whites having balls with fancy dress, using the Egungun masks that to the villagers was sacred.

WHAT ABOUT THE IDEA OF A KING HAVING A HORSEMAN—DID YOU EVER HEAR ABOUT THAT TRADITION BEFORE READING THE PLAY?

MUN: Yes. But mainly it was confined to European plays not African because horses are rare in Africa. Horses are not...at least southwest of the Sahara.

IN SIERRA LEONE FOR EXAMPLE...

MUN: In Sierra Leone no, no, we don't have them.

OH. SO WHAT DO YOU THINK THE ROLE OF THE HORSEMAN IS? ACCORDING TO THE PLAY WHAT DO YOU THINK ELESIN'S ROLE IS?

MUN: Well, the role of a horseman according to the play? Well I don't want to believe he just rode horses during the time of the king. I want to believe that the horseman was next to the king in power. So everybody looked up to the horseman. He had a spiritual leadership role. People saw him as a sort of representative between the dead and them and that he had to accompany the king because his presence was very necessary since without him the king could not get to heaven, what they thought as heaven.

AND WHAT ABOUT THIS IDEA OF "DEATH OF DEATHS," WHAT IS IT?

MUN: Death of Deaths?

THE WAY THAT ELESIN WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE. HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE THE DEATH OF DEATHS.

MUN: Well yes. He wasn't the only one who died because there was the horse and the dog. He was supposed to die in a way...his own death was to be the supreme death among all of them...

BUT HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO DIE?

MUN: Well to kill himself.

HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO KILL HIMSELF?

MUN: By committing suicide [laugh].

HOW WAS HE SUPPOSED TO COMMIT SUICIDE? BY DRINKING POISON, BY STABBING HIMSELF?

MUN: Drinking poison, stabbing himself?

I'M ASKING YOU!

MUN: I'm not sure. There's no indication of him stabbing himself. I'm sure he should have been hypnotized...

WHO SHOULD HAVE HYPNOTIZED HIM?

MUN: Himself. Because at the latter part of the book while going through the forest with the praise singer, it seems as if the praise singer had certain words that brought the man beyond his own being. Made him to have thoughts...sort of cajoling the man to put himself in a certain situation in which he wouldn't think of the world. He would think of saving everybody. He would think of seeing things that are not seen, think of having things that don't happen here—having a conversation with the gods and as such crossing the river of life.

SO THAT'S THE WAY HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE?

MUN: Well I'm sure something should have been done at that final stage. But it was not done.

HOW DO YOU, PERSONALLY, REACT TO THE IDEA OF POLYGAMY IN THE PLAY?

MUN: Well, the idea of polygamy in the play? It's not controversial. You don't have women who agitate—like women's lib, having one man one wife...all that is not there.

WELL WHAT ABOUT FOR YOU? LET'S FORGET ABOUT THE PLAY...

MUN: Of course I'm against that!

YOU ARE AGAINST POLYGAMY? WHY?

MUN: [Agitated] WHY?! [pause. Laughs] diverse reasons. So many reasons. I can't share my man, that's impossible.

SO YOU DON'T APPROVE....

MUN: [almost shouting] Of course not. For me.

WHAT ABOUT FOR OTHER PEOPLE?

MUN: I can tell you 80% of women don't approve of polygamy. Because in the social...

WHERE DID YOU GET THAT FIGURE?

MUN: Even 99% of the girls don't approve [Laugh].

[Laugh] SO YOU WOULDN'T GET MARRIED TO A MAN WHO IS ALREADY MARRIED?

MUN: Even if you are stinking rich!

ARE YOU A CHRISTIAN OR A MUSLIM?

MUN: I'm a Christian.

[Surprised] YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN? I THOUGHT YOU WERE A MUSLIM. YOU HAVE A MUSLIM NAME.

MUN: My father...

YOUR FATHER IS A MUSLIM. SO HOW MANY WIVES DOES YOUR FATHER HAVE? [Mun. raises one finger]. I CAN'T RECORD THAT ON TAPE [Laugh].

MUN: [Laugh] one.

SO HOW COME YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN IF YOUR FATHER IS A MUSLIM?

MUN: My father isn't that strict that he tries to control our faith.

AND YOUR MOTHER IS WHAT?

MUN: A Muslim.

[Surprised] YOUR MOTHER IS A MUSLIM TOO? AND YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN. SO HOW DID YOU COME TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

MUN: Well, by conversion.

IS YOUR SISTER A CHRISTIAN?

MUN: Which one?

THE ONE AT BARCLAYS.

MUN: She is a Muslim.

SO YOU ARE THE ONLY CHRISTIAN?

MUN: No, the other one at the Prince of Wales.

THAT'S INTERESTING. SO YOUR FATHER COULD HAVE HAD MORE THAN ONE WIFE IF HE'D WANTED TO.

MUN: Yes! He had had more than one wife.

HE HAD?

MUN: Yes. But numerous quarrels sent the other one packing.

SO HE CAN HAVE MORE THAN ONE WIFE?

MUN: He did have.

BUT YOU DON'T APPROVE?

MUN: [Getting angry] Ah! How many times do you want me to say it?

[Laugh] O.K., O.K., LET'S TAKE IT THAT YOU DON'T APPROVE. LET'S LOOK AT SOMETHING ELSE. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY?

MUN: The language of the play. O.K. At first it seemed long— winded. with a lot of proverbs, actually not making sense because you didn't know why those things were said. But later on the language became rather alive. It's present English, it's used, it's rampant. So when you read it...and it's so artistically manipulated that the words...his choice and use of words are very effective, especially in the dialogue among the girls when they were imitating the whites—"oh how are you?", "how's the weather?"—you know, mimicking the whites. It was so realistic, so funny.

ER...THIS MIGHT SEEM LIKE A SILLY QUESTION BUT WHAT LANGUAGE IS THE PLAY WRITTEN IN?

MUN: The play is written at first...of course it's in English. But it's adapted to our own surroundings with the use of proverbs and all the rest of it—which makes it a little bit complex. Then later on it comes to everyday English.

SO WHEN HE ADAPTS IT OR AFRICANIZES THE LANGUAGE, DO YOU FIND THAT PART DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND?

MUN: It becomes difficult when you don't know why you are reading it, why he's using that sort of...

WELL, LET'S FORGET ABOUT WHY HE'S USING IT. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT THE CHARACTERS ARE SAYING WHEN THEY USE PROVERBS AND WHEN THEY USE RIDDLES?

MUN: Of course, yes, I understand.

O.K. LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THE SPEECHES. [FINDS A SPEECH IN TEXT]. CAN YOU READ THIS SPEECH BY AMUSA?

MUN: [Reads] "AMUSA: (without looking up). Madam I arrest ringleader but I no touch Egungun. That Egungun itself I no touch and I no abuse am. I arrest ringleaders but I treat Egungun with respect."

THANKS. WHAT LANGUAGE IS THAT?

MUN: This is adapted from the Pidgin language. It's...

IT'S ADAPTED FROM PIDGIN...

MUN: It's Pidgin but it's got a little bit of English construction.

SO HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT IT'S PIDGIN?

MUN: Well, I've heard this sort of language before, though not in this form. It's broken English of course.

WHAT IS IT SIMILAR TO?

MUN: It's similar to the one that is spoken in Nigeria.

[FINDS ANOTHER SPEECH] READ THIS ONE.

MUN: [Reads] "AMUSA: I am tell you women for last time to comot my road. I am here on official business."

WHAT IS HE SAYING THERE?

MUN: That the women should get out of his way, and that he is on something official.

SO WHAT DOES THIS WORD MEAN? THIS WORD "COMOT"?

MUN: "Comot"? To get out.

HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT? IS IT ENGLISH?

MUN: It's not English but it's rampant in West Africa, it's part of the vernacular around.

LET'S LOOK AT THE IMAGERY SOYINKA EMPLOYS. WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE IMAGERY IN THE PLAY?

MUN: The images were very much in place. They suited what he was trying to say. They portrayed what he wanted, actually.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

MUN: Like in...there is an image...let me see...well he talks of wars when he was talking of when the whites came—trying to praise Oba Elesin. He does this very well when he talks of their history, their past. When the whites came, how they fought them, how the city fell, how the city rose again. This portrays their history in a shortened form, you know highlights their history and all the rest of it, the way they stood together, the way they fought. So this image of war is very effective.

O.K., NOW LET'S LOOK AT ONE PARTICULAR IMAGE. ON PAGE 44, HE SAYS...[THIS IS THE PRAISE SINGER TALKING TO ELESIN], HE SAYS [READS] "ELESIN ALAFIN DON'T THINK I DO NOT KNOW WHY YOUR LIPS ARE HEAVY, WHY YOUR LIMBS ARE DROWSY AS PALM OIL IN THE COLD OF HARMATTAN." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

MUN: That he as the drummer knows why Elesin has been in this sort of mood. Why he has become downcast and seems to be in a trance.

SO WHAT LITERALLY DOES IT MEAN WHEN HE SAYS THAT HIS LIMBS ARE DROWSY AS PALM OIL IN THE COLD OF HARMATTAN?

MUN: That he becoming cold, sort of stiff because palm oil in the harmattan. You know in the harmattan the place is chilly and then to have palm oil which when it's sunny is melted and flows, in the harmattan it settles, sets sort of. It congeals to a hard chunk . So to have the limbs of the Oba sort of becoming stiff in a hard chunk—sort of almost not showing any sign of life.

SO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT HE MEANS WHEN HE USES THAT IMAGE?

MUN: Yes. It's clear.

LET'S LOOK AT ANOTHER IMAGE. ON PAGE 20, ELESIN IS SPEAKING HERE [READS] "WHO DOESN'T SEEK TO BE REMEMBERED? MEMORY IS MASTER OF DEATH—THE CHINK IN HIS ARMOUR OF CONCEIT." DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?

MUN: Well, the chink in his armour of conceit. O.K., the chink is obviously a devise, or literacy devise used here. What should I say? [pause]

O.K. WHAT DOES HE MEAN WHEN HE SAYS THAT "MEMORY IS THE MASTER OF DEATH"?

MUN: That when you are dead you don't remember anything again... it's as if...[pause] I'm lost.

O.K. LET'S TAKE THE WORDS INDIVIDUALLY. WHAT IS ARMOUR?

MUN: Armour is gear that is worn to protect the individual in times of war.

WHAT IS IT MADE OF?

MUN: It is made of iron. Used to protect the individual from harm during times of war.

AND WHAT IS CONCEIT?

MUN: Conceit is lying, not true to yourself or anybody. Or you can say somebody is conceited when the person cares for himself too much, thinks of himself, doesn't think about others.

AND WHAT IS CHINK?

MUN: A chink? That one puzzles the hell out of me.

SO YOU DON'T KNOW?

MUN: Actually.

SO IF YOU READ THAT ENTIRE SPEECH DO YOU UNDERSTAND IT?

MUN: If it's the entire speech maybe I'll try to get the meaning but just a line...it's difficult.

SO FROM READING THE ENTIRE SPEECH WHAT DO YOU GATHER THAT HE'S SAYING HERE?

MUN: When the person is dead, the memory, the thoughts that you leave behind in the hearts of people, can sort of crown everything. It can make people remember you. If you had done something good while you were alive people would sing your praises and you would become famous.

I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT SOME OF THE CHARACTERS BUT BEFORE I ASK YOU ABOUT THAT HOW DO YOU KNOW ABOUT A CHARACTER, HOW DO YOU FIND OUT WHAT A CHARACTER IS LIKE?

MUN: Well through what the character says and does and basically what other people say about the character.

SO WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ELESIN OBA IS LIKE?

MUN: Elesin Oba has a political role, a little bit of a political role than the spiritual one. He is a lesser Oba in the political hierarchy. He is looked upon as divine, as a representative of their god on earth. He is the one who smoothens the passage of their king after death and as such his role is very significant. He becomes an Oba as an oracle. And he sort of wards off evil from the land. That is why he is treated as if he's a baby—given everything he wants.

WHAT ELSE CAN YOU SAY ABOUT HIM? WHAT IS HE LIKE AS A PERSON?

MUN: As a person he has conscience. He has conscience, he has resolution. He adheres to tradition. He is not influenced by other people or by what they say. Even at his downfall he was wishing that the reverse had taken place and he had died.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ABOUT PILKINGS?

MUN: Pilkings. Pilkings is the real colonialist. As far as he is concerned everything that smells of Africa is barbaric and outdated. He sees the Africans' customs as barbaric. Committing suicide...he can't understand why the king's horseman should commit suicide, thereby causing death when one has already happened. As far as he is concerned, all blacks are inferior. None has intelligence. The only thing they have to show is life but they can't measure up in any direction. And that they are superstitious in the extreme.

WHAT ABOUT OLUNDE?

MUN: Olunde. Well Olunde is the one who shows the lighter side of their culture. He tries to portray why their culture is the way it is...why the king's horseman has to commit suicide. He agrees with all those principles because he knows it's part of their culture and he sort of reveals the weaker side of the whites' culture. Because as far as the whites in Africa are concerned, their's is the best, everything is proper. But by spending years in England, he was able to portray when he came back the bad side of the whites. Understand?

AND WHAT ABOUT IYALOJA?

MUN: Iyolaja is the voice of the people, the voice of the market. She personifies everybody. The thoughts of the people are said through Iyaloja. She is the typical strong traditionalist who will not sway from the way of tradition. You see?

WELL YOU'VE SAID SHE'S THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE, DO YOU THINK THEN THAT WOMEN HAVE A VOICE IN THIS PLAY?

MUN: No. Women don't have a voice in this play. They take the back seat.

BUT DOES IYALOJA TAKE THE BACK SEAT?

MUN: Iyaloja doesn't take a back seat, that is why I'm sure that she plays a spiritual role. She is at the head of all the women. She presented Elesin with the bride, she placates when Elesin Oba was sort of angry.

WELL, THAT SEEMS TO CONTRADICT WHAT YOU JUST SAID—I MEAN THAT WOMEN DON'T HAVE A VOICE.

MUN: Well yes, I'm talking about the majority—they don't have a voice. But Iyaloja I'm sure has a spiritual role to play and as such she is equal to a man in the conclave of men.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF HER HAVING THAT ROLE? DO YOU APPROVE OF A WOMAN HAVING A ROLE LIKE THAT OR DO YOU THINK THAT IT'S O.K. FOR WOMEN TO BE IN THE BACKGROUND?

MUN: It's not O.K. for women to be in the background, of course! Ha!

O.K., DON'T BITE MY HEAD OFF [LAUGH] I WAS ONLY ASKING.

MUN: [laughs] Well it's not bad if she has that role—I mean she stood up even more than some of the men. Imagine when they brought Olunde in—he was already dead—Iyaloja headed that procession. She never broke down. She didn't even shed a tear.

SO SHE'S A STRONG WOMAN?

MUN: She's very, very strong.

IN YOUR OPINION WHOSE FAULT IS IT THAT ELESIN DOESN'T DIE THE "DEATH OF DEATHS"?

MUN: Obviously it is Pilkings'. Elesin would have died if Pilkings had not interrupted.

WELL, YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT A CLASH OF CULTURES IN THE PLAY— ABOUT THE WHITE PEOPLE HAVING THEIR OWN CULTURE AND THE YORUBA HAVING THEIR OWN CULTURE. WHEN YOU READ THE PLAY WHOM DID YOU SYMPATHIZE WITH MORE?

MUN: I sympathized with...first of all Olunde, then Elesin Oba because they became victims, pawns. They were sort of played around like chess pieces.

BY WHOM?

MUN: By the various cultures—the Africans and the whites. The whites thought they were protecting them—O.K., they protected their physical lives but in the African eye they didn't protect their social standing. They rendered them devoid of honour. That way was why Olunde preferred to commit suicide than to face such a situation.

SO WHO DO YOU AGREE WITH—DO YOU AGREE WITH THE WHITE PEOPLE OR THE YORUBA?

MUN: None—they all have their shortcomings.

SO WHEN YOU READ THE PLAY YOU WERE UNBIASED?

MUN: Yes. I didn't approve of any group because...look at Iyaloja, when she came to admonish Elesin, it wasn't Elesin Oba's fault. He had completed almost all the ceremony and then he was jolted out of it, handcuffed and brought to prison.

NOW, YOU'VE MENTIONED ALL THE DANCING, SINGING, DRUMMING— ESPECIALLY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PLAY. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF SOYINKA INCLUDING ALL THAT IS IN THE PLAY? WHAT DOES IT DO FOR THE PLAY?

MUN: Well O.K....Of course the play is in Nigeria which is an African country and all the elements that he uses are familiar to us. So it sort of brings the play home when he uses those proverbs which are familiar to us...and the singing, the dancing and all the rest of it.

THERE'S A REFERENCE TO THE GREAT MARKET. ON PAGE 17. THE WOMEN SAY [READS] "WE SHALL ALL MEET AT THE GREAT MARKET, WE SHALL ALL MEET AT THE GREAT MARKET. HE WHO GOES EARLY" [AT THIS STAGE MUN JOINS IN THE QUOTE, APPARENTLY FROM MEMORY] "GETS THE BEST BARGAINS BUT WE SHALL MEET AND RESUME OUR BANTER." WHAT IS THE GREAT MARKET?

MUN: O.K. Well, I'll discuss it on two levels. The great market on the first level maybe would mean an ordinary market...a literal market—because during those days it was common to have a cluster of villages around the place—sort of just two, three houses in a clearing and then after a mile or two another one. So it was common to have a rendezvous at which everybody will come and bargain and there were some women that went earlier and got the best bargains and some that came later. And then I'll discuss this on a metaphorical level. The market may be the great beyond. O.K. "he who goes early takes the best bargains" — maybe this they associate with the king and the horseman going early, having everything better in the after life. And then, "we shall meet and resume our banter",—since the king is there, we are going there and there again we will continue our lives all over again.

NOW ON PAGE 15, ELESIN SAYS "WHAT ELDER TAKES HIS TONGUE TO HIS PLATE?" [MUNIRATU STARTS LAUGHING] "LICKING IT CLEAN OF EVERY CRUMB?" [MUNIRATU JOINS IN ENDING THE QUOTE] "HE WILL ENCOUNTER SILENCE WHEN HE CALLS ON CHILDREN TO FULFILL THE SMALLEST ERRANDS." WHY WILL THE ELDER ENCOUNTER SILENCE AND WHY ARE YOU LAUGHING?

MUN: It's so true, it's so real!

SO WHY WILL THE ELDER ENCOUNTER SILENCE?

MUN: Of course! [laugh] It is customary to leave something on your plate for the person who is going to have to take the plate away and perhaps to wash it. You don't have to take all the leavings from the plate and leave an empty plate. You wouldn't have respect in an African home.

SO IT'S AN AFRICAN CUSTOM?

MUN: It's an African custom. Even when I was young people wouldn't do that to me.

SO YOU ARE USED TO GETTING YOUR PROPER SHARE OF THE LEAVINGS?

MUN: Of course, [laugh]

I HOPE THAT NOW YOU LEAVE SOMETHING ON THE PLATE FOR WHOEVER...

MUN: Of course I do. I have a conscience. And I want my respect.

NOW WHAT DO YOU THINK OF A WOMAN FINDING A WIFE FOR HER SON?

MUN: Ah, it's common. The mother asking for a wife for her son even when he is not present...that's a typical African tradition.

IT'S PRACTICED IN SIERRA LEONE?

MUN: It's practiced in Sierra Leone, though it is dying out. But in the interior, in villages, I'm sure it's practiced though to a lesser extent than in the past. At a certain time in Africa it was common. People even arranged before children were born. So it brings the whole play home.

SO HOW DO YOU PERSONALLY REACT TO IT? SAY SOMEBODY COMES TO ASK FOR YOUR HAND FOR...

MUN: Oh, you can't dare. That person won't dare.

SO THAT MEANS YOU DON'T LIKE THE IDEA WHEN IT...

MUN: I disapprove. It is contrary to the doctrines of modern days.

O.K. NOW WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT EGUNGUN?

MUN: Egungun? Well first of all it's a Nigerian masked devil. I'm not sure whether they have any link will the dead but formerly it was thought that members of the Egungun had a link with the dead.

IS IT LIMITED TO NIGERIA?

MUN: It's not limited to Nigeria, it's common in West Africa. It's even in Sierra Leone but it originated in Nigeria.

SO WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO DO WITH THE DEAD?

MUN: Well they have a link that other mortals don't have. It seems as if a sort of rapport goes on between the Egungun members and the dead which we don't have with the dead and as such they become seers—previously that is what was thought of them but not now.

SO WHAT ABOUT NOW?

MUN: It has eroded. The Egungun is just a shadow of its former self.

SO HOW DO YOU REACT TO THE IDEA OF PILKINGS AND HIS WIFE USING THE EGUNGUN COSTUME AS FUNNY DRESS?

MUN: Well actually, for now, this modern day, it wouldn't be bad because people put all sorts of things on. You would only ridicule yourself, expose yourself to ridicule. But then it was held as sacred, it was held in high esteem. People never imitated the Egungun. I'm sure Pilkings knew that because he had stayed so long in that region. And for his wife to have known the natives to such an extent would mean that this customs were as known to him as the back of his palm. He knew he wanted to go and impress the whites and for them it was impressive but for the Africans it was of desecration their sacred roles and reputations.

HOW ABOUT FOR YOU?

MUN: For me...I don't have any reservations because as far as I'm concerned it's a merriment going spree. It doesn't affect me but if I were born in that same time it would have affected me because I'm an African all the same.

NOW LETS LOOK AT THE DICTION FOR A WHILE. I JUST WANT TO GO THROUGH SOME OF THE WORDS AND SEE WHAT YOU MAKE OF THEM. NOW ELESIN IS DESCRIBED AS AN "OBA", WHAT IS AN OBA?

MUN: An Oba is a ruler. He was next to the Alafin—the Alafin is the head. An Oba is a sub-chief, equivalent to a sub-chief in Sierra Leone.

ON PAGE 11, THERE'S A REFERENCE TO "ARABA"—WHAT IS THAT?

MUN: Well it's common. Maybe it would be the falling of the cotton or something of the sort.

ON PAGE 12, THERE'S A REFERENCE TO A "MALLAM."

MUN: A Mallam is a religious teacher.

ANY RELIGIOUS TEACHER? LIKE MR. J...IS HE A...

MUN: No, Islamic. An Islamic religious teacher.

WHAT IS THE KORAN?

MUN: The Koran is the equivalent of the Bible but it is used by the Muslims.

DO YOU KNOW THE WORD "IFA"?

MUN: Yes. It's an oracle. I've come across the word before, it's an oracle.

ON PAGE 13 THERE'S A REFERENCE TO "ELEGBARA"—WHAT IS THAT?

MUN: Elegbara—I'm sure he's a god.

FROM THE CONTEXT OR DID YOU KNOW THAT BEFORE?

MUN: I never knew it—I got it from the context.

ON PAGE 14, THERE'S A REFERENCE TO AN ADDER, WHAT IS AN ADDER?

MUN: It's a snake.

ON PAGE 19, THERE'S A REFERENCE TO OGUN. HAVE YOU HEARD THE WORD BEFORE?

MUN: Yeah—it's a god, the god of thunder and lighting of the Yorubas.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE AWUSA NUT IS? IYALOJA SAYS "EATING THE AWUSA NUT IS NOT AS DIFFICULT AS DRINKING WATER AFTERWARDS."

MUN: The awusa nut is some nut that's bitter.

WELL, WHY DOES SHE SAY EATING IT IS NOT AS DIFFICULT AS DRINKING WATER AFTERWARDS?

MUN: Because when eating it, it's not too bitter—but the taste after you drink water! And usually there's that urge to drink water after eating it.

SO YOU KNOW THE NUT?

MUN: Well I'm sure maybe the nut has another name here but I'm sure it's around but I got that meaning from the context.

[LAUGH] OH, O.K. SO YOU DID THE SAME THING I DID. I ALSO ONLY GOT THE MEANING FROM THE CONTEXT. BUT SOMEBODY WHO HAS EATEN IT EXPLAINED VIRTUALLY THE SAME THING. I THOUGHT YOU HAD EATEN IT. O.K. ELESIN IS SAID TO FLICK THE SLEEVES OF HIS "AGBADA"—WHAT IS AGBADA?

MUN: Agbada is a national costume of Nigerians. Nigerians in general and Yorubas in particular.

WHAT ABOUT SIERRA LEONEANS?

**MUN:** Ours is ronko. They wear agbada here but it's not common, and it's adopted from Nigeria.

THAT'S TRUE. NOW PILKINGS AND HIS WIFE ARE SAID TO BE "TANGOING"—WHAT IS THAT?

**MUN:** [laugh] It is the dance that was in vogue at that time

HOW DOES ONE DANCE THE TANGO?

**MUN:** Skipping about the place.

IS THAT HOW YOU DANCE THE TANGO? DO YOU KNOW SPECIFICALLY HOW IT IS DANCED?

**MUN:** No, but from the movements that they made in the play, from what I read between the limes, I'm sure it was skipping and ambling up and down [laugh].

WHAT DOES "BLUSTERING" MEAN?

**MUN:** Sort of sulking or giving a negative attitude.

WHEN THE GIRLS WERE IMITATING THE WHITE PEOPLE, AT ONE STAGE ONE OF THEM SAID [READS] "WHAT'S YOUR HANDICAP OLD CHAP." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

**MUN:** What are you short of? What don't you have?

ON PAGE 45, IT SAYS [READS] "THE BAND STRIKES UP A VIENNESE WALTZ AND THE PRINCE FORMALLY OPENS THE FLOOR. SEVERAL BARS LATER, THE RESIDENT AND HIS COMPANION FOLLOW SUIT. OTHERS FOLLOW IN APPROPRIATE PECKING ORDER." WHAT IS MEANT BY PECKING ORDER?

**MUN:** Pecking order. O.K. you know what is pecking.

MAYBE I DON'T—YOU'LL HAVE TO TELL ME.

**MUN:** O.K. you can say it means to give somebody a kiss on the cheek...and then you know when birds do peck...opening their beaks and closing it, making that funny sound.[pause]

SO IF PEOPLE MOVE IN PECKING ORDER WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

**MUN:** Well, they were not in a straight line of course and they all didn't move together.

O.K. ON PAGE 56 PILKINGS SAYS ABOUT OLUNDE [READS] "HE'S PICKED UP THE IDIOM ALL RIGHT. WOULDN'T SURPRISE ME IF HE'S BEEN MIXING WITH COMMIES OR ANARCHISTS OVER THERE." WHO OR WHAT IS A COMMIE?

**MUN:** Commies or anarchists? Agitators.

SO ANYBODY WHO AGITATES IS A COMMIE?

**MUN:** Yes.

I THINK THAT'S ABOUT IT. THANK YOU VERY MUCH, IT WAS A VERY INTERESTING INTERVIEW.

## Vita

### PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: Handel Kashope Wright.

Place and Year of Birth:
Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1959.

### EDUCATION

1988-1990 Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, M.Ed.

1985-1987 University of Windsor, Ontario, M.A. English.

1978-1983 Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, B.A. (Hons) English.

1971-1978 St. Edward's Secondary School, Freetown.

### EXPERIENCE

1989-1990 Research Assistant, Queen's University, Kingston.

1987-1988 Editor, Centre for Research into the Education of Secondary Teachers, Freetown.

1985-1987 Teaching Assistant, University of Windsor,Ontario.

1983-1985 Teacher, St. Edward's Secondary School.
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### AWARDS

1988-1990 CIDA Scholarship, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

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